

# デジネ!! SH+2

成田良悟

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Illustration : Suzuhito Yasuda





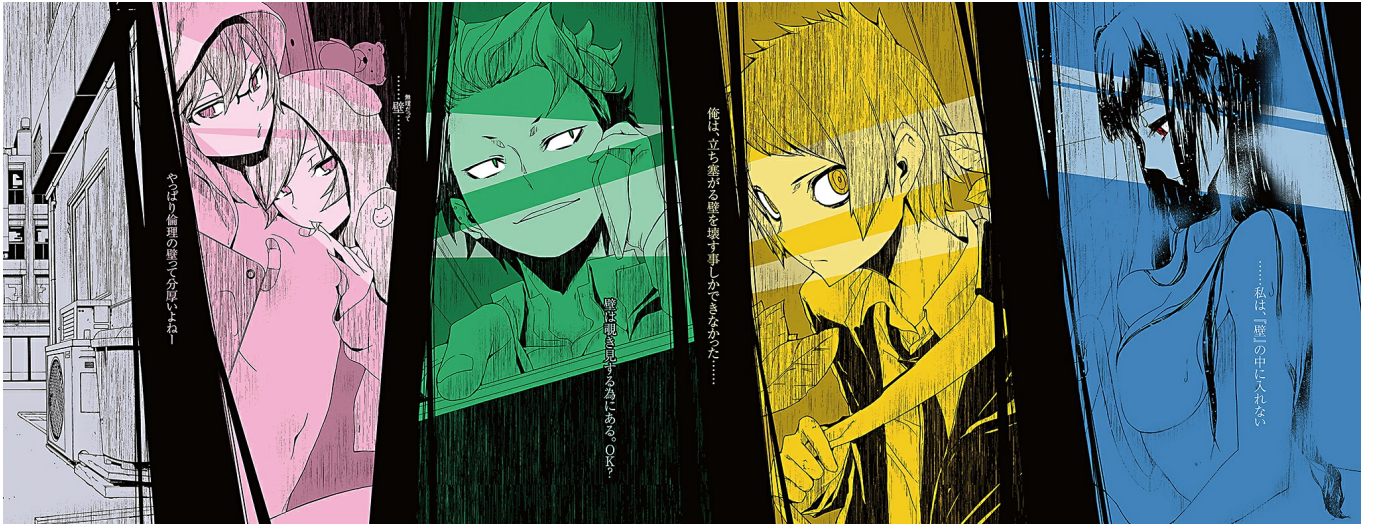


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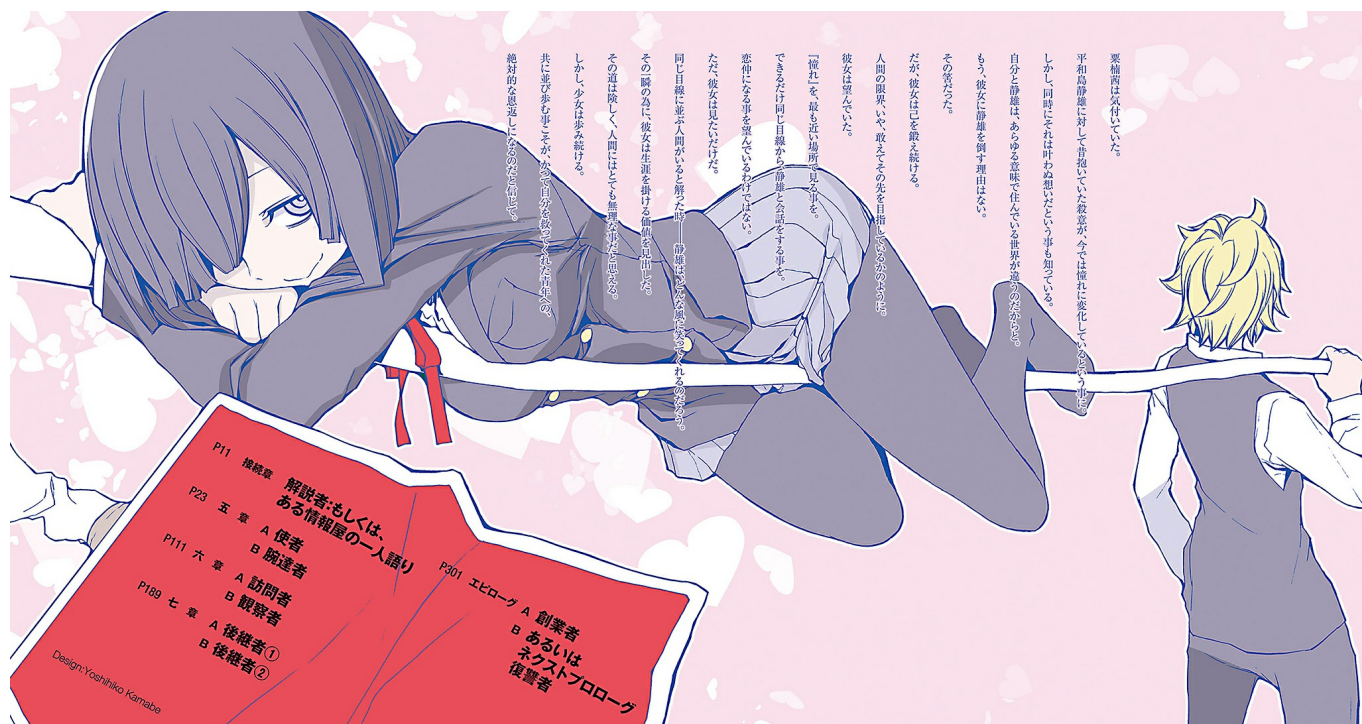
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# 接統章

# Connecting Chapter

## The Commentator

A few years ago. Shinjuku.

“Hello. How are you?

Actually, to be quite honest it's not all that important.

It doesn't matter to me whether you're full of life or in the pit of despair.

But I do wonder why you're here to see me.

Someone your age should know by now, right? Contacting a shady person like me won't land you anywhere good.

Ah, so it's the Headless Rider again.

Earlier in Ikebukuro, we talked about... how people would respond faced with the Headless Rider, correct?

How humans display a diversity of reactions when encountering something different.

It could be a monster or some kind of supernatural occurrence; even another human.

But when it's a human like themselves rather than an unknown that they witness, the reaction produced might once again be different.

You don't know what it is – but it apparently exists.

That's the kind of thing that stirs the human imagination the most.

Just speak with the Headless Rider once and it ceases to be an unknown. You might not know what the Headless Rider is exactly; but at that point you would at least have realised that it's a rational being that can understand language.

Just by reaching that point the it ceases to be an unknown.

But you have to meet the Headless Rider for any of this to happen.

Say there's a person who's never seen the Headless Rider before – if they were to believe on the spot someone claiming the Headless Rider understands Japanese as well as anyone else, that would be singular proof that the speaker holds a great deal of that person's trust.

And here the Headless Rider demonstrates something extraordinary.

It's clear enough that the Headless Rider is an abnormal being, yes?

Just one look at those undulating shadows or that soundless engine can tell you that much; its existence is beyond present knowledge.

There are plenty of people who think it's a farce, but just the same there are many people thinking this:

‘Ah... The world is growing ever-stranger.’

Half of these people are terrified; the other half are elated.

Atheists and those who reject supernatural phenomena might panic, perhaps.

Ah, but those two groups might not always be equivalent. I've seen both atheists embracing the paranormal, and devout believers who reject it.

Leaving that aside... That a world beyond human knowledge does exist, right there.

That might instill certain emotions.

For example... desire.

You'd think fear would come first, right?

Perhaps that would be the normal reaction.

But they do exist.

People who experience yearning when they see, in our world, impossible things; things that can't be explained by science – they do exist.

For example, those completely entrapped by reality, with no hope of escape, who wish to run away from that reality.

This world is a lie. There has to be a world where my life doesn't have to be so hard.

Nonetheless, however much they think that, life isn't going to change, is it?

Because they lack the ability to free themselves by their own strength.

So they seek.

Seek what?

A turning point!

A turning point, no matter how tiny, to turn the world inside out!

You've thought of it too, right?

If only I had some special power.

If only my legs were faster.

If only my arms were stronger.

If only my mind were sharper.

If only my face were more attractive.

If only I could sing.

If only I could draw.

If only I could understand the feelings of others.

If only I had psychic powers.

It starts with those minute desires.

A desire for a version of themselves with something more.

But eventually this transforms to resentment towards reality.

It's the accumulation of frustration at how, no matter how hard they try, they remain powerless and unable to surpass themselves.

It's not the fictional kind of power they desire. They're not looking to spout fire from their hands, or anything like that.

It could be the shred of courage a bullied student needs to tell someone what's going on.

It could be the spark of killing intent a beaten child needs to just lightly push their parent from the top of the stairs.

It could be the minimal level of writing ability needed to fantasise the death of an enemy and pen it down in a journal.

Well, to be frank, it doesn't even have to be anything as depressing as that. There are probably people who simply hate their day-to-day life for being tedious.

In any case, what I'm saying is, all of these people, with their various brands of discontentment towards reality, have this one wish in common.

'If I cannot change, then the world has to change,' that is.

What if at this point, a turning point signifying a change in the world were to show up on TV?

Something that shatters the laws of physics and the common sense of society, that threatens the foundation of the world itself.

Think about it.

Say the Headless Rider is a ghost.

If that were proven, it would be as good as proving the existence of an afterlife.

If such a thing came to pass, the world would be overturned.

Would suicide rates increase? Or go down?

Do you think someone would kill themselves comforted in the knowledge of a definite afterlife?

Or would they despair that their consciousness would live on after death and give up on suicide?

You might find it despicable for me to use such childish theories as an example, but in reality something so meaningless can have a significant impact in people's lives. That's what it means to be human.

At any rate, those who hold the Headless Rider in regard might not be people who've met it directly, but in fact those who watch it from afar, you know.

To a certain demographic, the Headless Rider represents hope.

People have realities they can only swallow.

In the end, it hinges on the individual.

Upon meeting the same fate there will be those who deny and reject the situation, inasmuch as those who accept it defeatedly. Of course, there will also be those who take things in stride positively.

An unescapable reality is something everyone has, no matter how slight.

That's why, no matter what path they choose to take, it's only another form of humanity. It's valid in my eyes.

Even if the path taken is what the world at large would label criminal.

Because I love humans."



Present time. One morning. The Tatsugami household.

"Himeka. It'll be all right, right?"

So said Himeka's mother, in a frail voice. She was a woman aged beyond her years, and her face seemed somehow drawn.

"You won't – you won't disappear, right? Himeka?"

Tatsugami Himeka had two sisters, older and younger.

However, both had gone missing, their last words being that they might be able to meet the Headless Rider.

It had been half a month since the last had been heard from either, and while the police had put up notices, there was no trace of their whereabouts.

Considering that two of the woman's daughters had gone missing at the same time, it was no wonder she was weary. But Himeka knew.

Her mother had long been weary before things had come to this.

And she knew as well that even if her sisters were to return safely, her mother would continue in this weary state.



Rather than weary, it would be more appropriate to describe her as 'broken'.

Despite not verbalising it, Himeka had always had that thought.

"Himeka, please, please don't leave me alone with him. Don't leave me alone with **someone like him.**"

Himeka knew, as well, that the someone her mother spoke of was her father.

And she had grown used to this very scene years ago – of her mother mumbling words such as these, not directed at Himeka who stood beside her, but with her forehead against the wall in the corridor.

Her mother rubbed her forehead against the wall, talking to it.

Normally she was not always this way; in general she had a fit like this once a day or so.

After two of her daughters had vanished, the frequency of it had not worsened by much; in fact, it was the fact that nothing had changed that sorrowed Himeka.

Even so, the emotion was not to such a degree as to affect her expression.

With her usual cool expression, she stroked her mother's back and spoke.

"It's okay, Mother. They'll come back soon. Both of them."

And her mother said, calmly, though it was inscrutable if it was in reply or merely a coincidence:

"It's the Headless Rider's fault."

"..."

Himeka was silent; her mother, as if voicing the words for herself to hear, repeated the words under her breath.

"Aya, Ai, everything... That thing stole everything, everything from me! AAAaaAAaaaAAH!"

As her mother began to scream hysterically, Himeka hugged her softly from behind.

"It's all right. It's all right, Mother."

Deaf to her daughter's words, the woman continued to cast words into the space between herself and the wall.

"I knew it, I knew it... **I should have stopped them, even if I had to kill them to do it...** I should have stopped them..."

"Mother..."

"I knew it... I asked on the internet, you know? ...Everyone said horrible things, Himeka. Incomprehensible things. It's definitely the Headless Rider's fault, all of it, isn't it? You know, right? Himeka."

Even with her mother calling out her name at the wall all this time, Himeka's eyes reflected neither anger nor sadness.

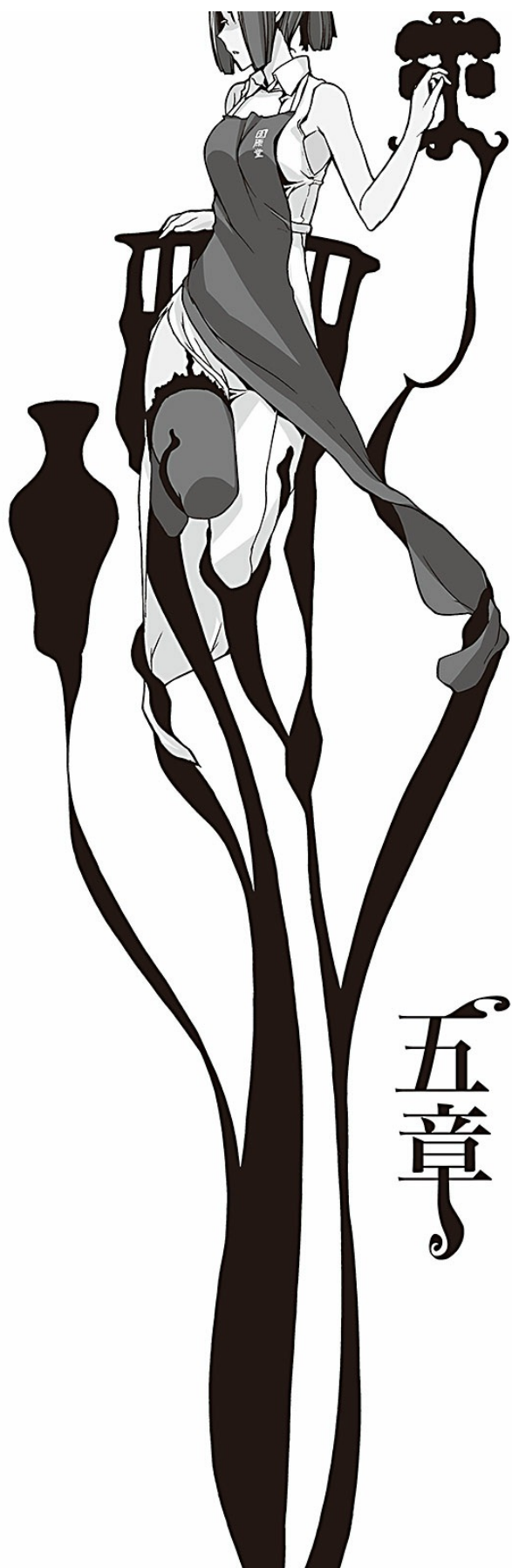
She simply steeled herself knowing that this was her everyday life, and that she had no choice but to accept it.

Even so, the feeling she mustered was, rather than resolve, closer to a sense of defeat.

And so, the girl, living the everyday life she had come to give up on – met an anomaly that had slipped into the city.

It was nothing so overtly different as the Headless Rider.

It was the monster who took the form of a harmless boy; Mizuchi Yahiro.



# 五章

# Chapter 5A

## The Messenger

Somewhere in Ikebukuro. Storefront of the antiques store Sonohara Hall.

The store was on the outskirts of Ikebukuro, and had an unplaceable sense of isolation about it.

Here, far from the busier streets around the train station, this old shophouse stood by its lonesome in a district of ordinary houses.

Being that it was an antiques store, it could be said that the store's exterior was only fitting and in fact enhanced its charm.

A display case fitted into one wall displayed red and black teacups and coins with unfamiliar inscriptions, further emphasising the quaintness of the store.

Suddenly the door to the shop swung open, and a group of young people clad in modern-style uniforms emerged.

"I'm glad I found a proper radio."

Stepping out of the store, a quiet-looking boy—Mizuchi Yahiro—heaved a sigh of relief as he looked at the radio in his hands.

"Thanks for showing me here, Tatsugami-san."

Although said offhandedly, the gratitude Yahiro offered was sincere. The girl he addressed, Tatsugami Himeka, shook her head.

"Don't worry, this place just happens to be near my home."

"But thank goodness I could get a cheap one."

Yahiro examined his purchase once more as he said this.

The casing itself was wooden, with an ascending dragon engraved in the back. When Yahiro had first seen the red and black of the mahogany he had even thought it might be mechanical rather than electrical.

Despite the uniqueness of this radio the lady who owned the shop had offered a discount seeing as they wore Raira uniforms, and he had acquired it at a surprisingly low price.

"You'd think a store recently opened by a Raira graduate would be pretty new, but it turns out to have this ancient vibe, what a shock, huh? And the store owner looks so serious with those glasses, but she's a real beauty—is she attached, you think?"

The boy behind Himeka and Yahiro who brought up this new topic—Kotonami Kuon—was even more incongruent with the store's atmosphere.

The boy with the dyed-green hair recalled the store owner from earlier and continued to speculate:

"But in the first place—such a young woman running a store by herself! Isn't that amazing? Does she have no family to help...?"

"Hm... I don't know, but when the place just started up there were some people helping with the renovations."

"Are there many shops like that around?"

Yahiro looked over his shoulder at the store shrinking into the distance behind them.

After some thought Himeka replied.

"I suppose there are plenty of private businesses around. Different areas have different environments, and there are a lot of interesting shops, so you might want to tour around to look."

"Tokyo is amazing after all..."

"Wait, this isn't actually exclusive to Tokyo."

Yahiro shook his head at Kuon's comment.

"Ah, sorry. I never really left my own village."

"And you just decided to come to Tokyo... That's quite interesting."

After that half-hearted reply, Kuon looked at Yahiro's radio.

"By the way, is it really okay to rely on a radio instead of a TV for news?"

"I think it'll be fine. I already have a smartphone anyway."

"Rather have a smartphone than a TV. How the times have changed. Ah. Do you go on any SNS?"

"SNS?"

Yahiro cocked his head curiously. Incredulous, Kuon rolled his shoulders, and explained politely:

"SNS—short for Social Network Service. The blanket term for services that use the internet to support human communication. In a nutshell like Twittia, Facemagazine, Nixi, Fine..."

Yahiro did not seem to recognise any of the services he listed, and began slowly,

"Like chatrooms?"

"Whoa. Never thought I'd hear the word 'chatroom' in this day and age. Impressive, actually. Eh, since you have a smartphone I can show you the free websites later..."

Kuon made as to continue, but he trailed off as a car horn honked from behind them.

"Eh?"

The trio spun around to see a car slowing down behind them.

The window at the passenger seat slid open, and a boy's face poked out.

He wore the same Raira uniform as them, and on first glance appeared to be their age.

However what Kuon said next marked him as senior.

"...Kuronuma-sempai."

"There you are. That hair sure is convenient when we're looking for you."

" are you here? Didn't I tell you I'm not free today? Argh."

Kuon responded easily to the upperclassman; behind him Yahiro and Himeka exchanged glances.

The upperclassman Kuon had called Kuronuma had a typical, tame look to him, but the fierce man in the driver's seat, combined with the fact that the rear windows were heavily tinted, lent a shady atmosphere to the situation.

Just as Yahiro was floundering about how to react, the upperclassman in the passenger seat turned towards him.

"...Hey, Kuon. Who are your friends here?"

Despite saying 'friends' in plural, his attention was fixed on Yahiro alone.

Yahiro guessed that the wound on his face must have drawn his eye. Kuon answered informally,

"Ah, they're my classmates. Mizuchi and Tatsugami-san."

"I see. I'm Kuronuma Aoba, third year. Pleasure."

"Nice to meet you... I'm Mizuchi Yahiro."

In reply to Aoba's friendly introduction, Yahiro bowed his head, while Himeka murmured her own greeting.

"Mizuchi-kun? It looks like you're hurt, are you okay?"



Aoba asked, looking at the bruise on Yahiro's face.

"It's nothing, I fell down the stairs..."

"You fell? Where?"

"Um..."

Having not expected further probing, Yahiro stumbled over his answer.

Kuon, however, backed him up, cutting into the conversation.

"Yeah! It was at the station! This guy's not used to the crowd since he came from up north, so he felt sick and toppled over all of a sudden! What a shock!"

"Uh, er, yeah."

Yahiro hurriedly corroborated the lie Kuon had so fluently produced.

"So that's how it is. Where are you from?"

"It's a hot spring town in Akita... Um, it's called Haburagi Village; north of Lake Hachirogata."

"Haburagi Village, huh."

After affirming this, Aoba grinned and said to Kuon,

"So you're showing your friend around?"

"Something like that, I guess."

"I see.. I never pegged you as such a considerate person."

With that he turned back to Yahiro and Himeka.

"You should be careful. If you hang out with this guy your grades will go down."

"Wha, you're awful, Aoba-sempai... I might look like this, but I'm a good tutor too, you know?"

Kuon sighed as he denied Aoba's claims.

Ignoring his junior, Aoba waved, smiling.

"We'll be going, then. Feel free to talk to me in school if you have any questions."

Emitting the air of an amiable upperclassman, Aoba shut the window.

The trio lapsed into silence as they watched the car turn out of the alley, but eventually Kuon let out a deep sigh and smiled.

"Puhyo~ That was embarrassing. That senior was just messing around. Don't mind it, all right? I mean it. It'll be a favour to me, too."

"But you're the only one he insulted, Kotonami-kun. I don't really mind..."

"I don't think he said anything worth worrying about in the first place."

Hearing Yahiro and Himeka's replies, Kuon grimaced, shrugging.

"Anyway, it's best if you stay away from him."

♂♀

In the car.

"We approached them too randomly, don't you think?"

Inside the van driving away from Yahiro and company.

The driver munched on chewing gum as he spoke.

"By the way, are you sure that kid's the one who had that showoff with Shizuo?"

"Probably. Kuon rarely bothers to hang out with anyone besides us, so there's a huge likelihood."

Aoba replied lackadaisically.

"If it were up to me I'd have exchanged contacts."

"Are you serious? He's the one who matched up to Shizuo?"

Aoba's teammate Yoshikiri asked from the back seat.

"I'm not sure. That's what we're going to find out."

"But Aoba. Even ignoring his build—doesn't he seem a bit too timid to fight anyone?"

Being a fight addict himself, Yoshikiri was generally able to recognise when a person was dangerous. But he had received none of those vibes from the boy Mizuchi Yahiro.

Even so, Aoba replied after some thought,

"Did you see his hands?"

"Eh? No, I couldn't see from the window."

"He had some unusual scars on them."

Yahiro's hands, from what Aoba had seen, were littered with unusual scars.

There was definitely some special circumstance behind this, but as it had only been their first meeting he had not broached the topic.

Hearing this another passenger in the backseat laughed.

"Scars on his hands, huh. Like what? Think he might've gotten stabbed with a biro?"

"Oi shut up."

Aoba frowned and rebuked him, before looking up at the ceiling of the car, mumbling to himself.

"Kuon's planning something, so I want to get that guy's contacts. But it would've been awkward to ask for his email back there."

Then he slowly took out his phone from his pocket.

"Haburagi Village... Ha-bu-ra-gi... There, this one?"

A simple search displayed foremost the home page of a hot spring inn, followed by tour companies and personal blogs introducing the 'secret hot spring'.

The website for the village office itself only showed up some way into the results, so it was surmisable that the place was quite famous for its hot springs.

With that he continued searching with various keywords, browsing through social media communities and message boards frequented by the locals.

After some minutes of searching, Aoba's eyes narrowed.

"Bingo."

The website on the screen was a message board based in a town near Haburagi Village.

It was a series of posts from about a week ago, in a thread for high schoolers to exchange news.

[I heard the monster from Haburagi's going to a high school in Tokyo]

[You mean Mizuchi?]

[Serious?]

[Thank goodness, if he went for a public school he'd be in mine]

[The seniors were terrified]

[Yes! My high school bliss is safe]

They bantered back and forth, treating the site as more of a chatroom than a message board, but this was sufficient for Aoba to confirm Yahiro's identity.

Despite smiling internally at having hit the nail on the head, Aoba's face remained cool as he murmured,

"Now what next? I'm curious about what Kuon is thinking..."

"If he's doing secret things without us we just need to get rid of him, right?"

Yoshikiri made this vile proposal, to which Aoba answered,

"Don't be hasty. We're not going to strangle the goose laying us golden eggs."

Then he continued calmly.

"Well, he could just be looking for more people to work for him... In the first place, we don't know the motives of that newcomer, either."

The conversation in the car ended there, and with that they returned to their normal—as it was for them—everyday lives.

But as if preventing that, Aoba's ringtone erupted from his phone.

"Oh, who is it."

Before taking the call, Aoba checked the caller ID displayed on the screen.

After a moment of astonishment, his mouth crooked into a smile as he picked up the call.

"Hello... It's been a long time. ...yes, I'm fine. ... Aw, don't sound so disappointed."

At Aoba's cheeriness the Blue Squares in the car exchanged glances. His use of polite language indicated the other party was of a higher status, but it had been a long time since Aoba had spoken to someone like that so cheerfully.

Some of them considered it might be Ryugamine Mikado, but the thought quickly perished.

Ryugamine Mikado had cut all ties to people like themselves, and at most made small talk with Aoba now and then in school.

While his team mates speculated Aoba continued talking with a smile.

"Sure, if it's someone I know I can send a photo over."

But in the next moment—

A hint of surprise flitted over that smiling face.

And as if to check with the person across the line, he repeated the unique name.

"Tatsugami Himeka... you said?"



A few days later. Raira Academy.

Raira Academy had begun regular lessons, and Yahiro was able to participate normally without standing out or being ostracised.

The wound on his face had mostly faded, and now that the bandage had come off he was fairly nondescript.

Both Himeka and Kuon were astonished by his quick recovery, but injuries were so common for Yahiro, who had

suffered random ambushes since childhood, that he found himself awkward with their reaction.

His classmates had at first been surprised when they saw him injured, but with someone as unapproachable as Kuon hanging around him few spoke to him more than necessary.

His fight with Shizuo behind him, Yahiro was just feeling grateful that he had successfully launched his peaceful high school life—

But in the end this peace was too easily terminated that very afternoon.

“Mi~ zu~ chi~ -ku~n! Le~t’s ha~ve so~me fu~n... aha!”

It was a few minutes into lunch break.

Yahiro was holding his home-made lunch, pondering where to eat it, when that feminine voice rang out from the back of the classroom.

The remaining students in the classroom looked up at the commotion, and glanced between the girl and Yahiro.

“Ah... Er... Orihara-sempai?”

“Tha~t’s right! Great! You remembered!”

The third year, who wore glasses and a braid, entered the first year classroom with nary a blink, and hopped onto Yahiro’s desk.

“Hey, do you have time after school today?”

“Er, I’m on after-school duty for the Library Committee...”

“Okay! Then I’ll see you at the library! There’s some stuff I want to talk about!”

They had only met once so far; yet Mairu uttered something so inconsiderate.

“You basically just said you’re going to disrupt my work, I don’t...”

“It’s fine. I’ll just say sorry to the Pres. By the way, where’s Kuon-kun?”

“Oh, he should be on the roof, I think.”

“Ah, I see. Maybe he’s eating with Aobacchi and friends?”

Due to this Kuon was not in the classroom, and Himeka had also left to buy her lunch.

Thus no one was around to rescue Yahiro; there were only his classmates, who were glancing surreptitiously from a distance.

“It’s all right to talk to me here, too, actually...”

“Ah, that won’t do. No rush, no rush.”

She grinned with her index finger over her lips, and then pressed her finger onto Yahiro’s mouth.

“...?!”

“Anyways, it’s something I can’t say here, so let’s have a nice long chat after school, all right?”

With a smile that put one at a loss whether to describe as innocent or annoying, the girl left the classroom.

“Mizuchi-kun, you know Orihara-sempai?”

After she had gone, a number of girls gathered around Yahiro curiously.

“I just met her recently... What is she like?”

Yahiro, surprised, responded with his own question, and the girls exchanged glances before replying.

“Hm... She’s exactly what she looks like.”

“She’s well-known in our school, right?”



"Her older twin sister's the VP of the student council..."

"The Orihara twins have both boy and girl fans worshipping them, so you better watch out~"

They supplied all kinds of information, but nothing specific, and so Yahiro was unable to grasp anything about her as a person.

From their latest encounter and the one at the gym he could see that she was a fairly unusual person, but what would someone like that want from him? With this doubt adrift in his mind Yahiro entertained his classmates, opening his lunchbox.

–Well, it shouldn't be anything too serious.

–She probably wants to talk about the Headless Rider, or invite me to the dojo.

That was the outcome Yahiro imagined; yet this almost impersonal prediction was thoroughly disproved.



After school. The library.

"Hey, how did you fight equally with Shizuo?!"

As Mairu delivered this outburst with shining eyes, Yahiro's face twitched of its own volition.

"Wh, what do you mean?"

"Don't pretend, don't pretend. We know what happened!"

"...Be... honest..."

Yahiro was very obviously avoiding eye contact, but the two had him sandwiched and were looking at him intently. Mairu was not alone; her older sister Orihara Kururi was with her, and they had cornered him in the library for this interrogation.

They were sensitive enough to avoid the crowd of the peak hour, and approach Yahiro around closing hours where most people had left already.

Cornered by two girls in the library after school, with no one else around.

Phrased that way it might sound exciting, but Yahiro was in no condition to savour the situation.

"No, I really don't know what you're..."

"You see~, it was videoed, you know~? It was from far away, so your face was blur, of course, but the guy beside you had green hair, you get it?"

"Aren't there a lot of people with green hair in Tokyo?"

"...Are you... sure...?"

Yahiro, being a bad liar, could only avert his eyes from the twin upperclassmen pressuring him.

He was panicking at this moment because he had not anticipated that others would know about the fight.

He had underestimated the information network in the city of Ikebukuro.

Having a big fight in the middle of the street was of course problem behaviour.

Yet, if that was all, Yahiro was used to police involvement, so it was not an issue. But this was not his hometown; it was not his own family but the Togusa family putting him up that he would be causing trouble for. Yahiro, who feared this, had in fact been relieved that the incident had not attracted the police. Although he had gotten over his loss to Shizuo, he was not proud of his longstanding record of frequent violence, and was afraid that the school would expel

him for the fight and send him back to his hometown. For Yahiro, this city was the only place where he could hope to find new self. He was thankful to his village. He did feel it was his home. But the hope he could find there was for peace and stability, and if he remained there, where he was labelled a monster, he would likely accept things as they were and give up on changing himself.

But this new city held possibility.

The Headless Rider, a true monster. Heiwajima Shizuo, who he had fought with his fullest strength against, and yet had been unable to defeat.

And his friends who had accepted him.

Yahiro was mesmerised by this barrage of changes in his life.

That was why he, a coward, was more afraid than anyone.

Afraid that the life he had finally achieved could be reduced to nothing.

"I, that is..."

"You don't have to hide it. It's not like we're going to scold you for fighting or spread rumours or anything."

"R, really?"

You just admitted it

"...That's... confirming..."

"Ah!"

Yahiro yelped as he realised his own carelessness.

If it were his past self in Akita, he would have grown serious for a time due to his fear, and would not have answered so foolishly. Yahiro was shocked at himself, and shook his head, attributing it to the culture shock bubbling in his mind.

In actuality, rather than being in Tokyo, it was just the remnants of the high he had experienced fighting Shizuo.

Yahiro looked away for a moment, and sighed defeatedly; then he confessed.

"Yeah... I did fight with Heiwajima-san..."

"I knew it!"

"...Amazing...!"

"Eh?"

Yahiro tilted his head, not knowing why the two starry-eyed girls were so happy.

When his violence was exposed, the eyes of the people around him would grow fearful, and naturally they would distance themselves from him. That was the pattern he had grown used to up to now.

But the reaction of these upperclassmen was not something he could have foreseen given his past experiences.

Yahiro hesitated in replying, but Mairu continued.

"It's amazing! You fought with the Shizuo head-on? It feels like a new hero's being born in Ikebukuro!"

"Hero?"

"Yep! The city's always hungry for new things. If you step out and confess you'll be the biggest star of the rumour mill, you know?"

"I don't really want to be..."

Although Mairu praised him, Yahiro's face darkened.

—Special treatment doesn't feel good, somehow, no matter what kind.

—In the first place, someone like me who was called a monster being a hero doesn't even count as a joke.

“No~? Well, that’s that, and we’ll respect your decision.”

“Thank you very much.”





"But I think it's already too late, yeah?"

"Eh?"

Yahiro raised his head curiously, and Mairu replied:

"Because you've already made a splendid debut here in Ikebukuro! Even if you try to lay low, the city won't let you off so easily."



A street in Ikebukuro. In front of Tokyu Hands.

"Yo, Yahiro, you're late."

From the train station an enormous junction far into Sunshine 60 Road could be seen.

The area in front of Tokyu Hands building, which stood next to it, was often crowded at any time of day or night.

There was an underpass to Sunshine City and other means by which people could travel to and from here easily, so it was a hotspot as a meet-up point.

The trio had agreed to meet up at six-thirty that evening to discuss what they would do from now on.

"Sorry, some seniors held me up at the library."

"Gah, Kuronuma-sempai?"

"No, Orihara-sempai."

"They're just as troublesome aren't they!"

Kuon gave his condolences, and then, with a more serious face, said,

"So, what did they say? Those girls are into idols, so it probably wasn't a confession or anything, right?"

"Yeah, we just had a chat."

After a glance at Himeka, Yahiro chose to answer vaguely.

Himeka was likely unaware of what had happened between Shizuo and himself.

He acted on this premise, and Kuon, probably detecting his reluctance, did not push him further.

"Eh, our school churns out lots of problematic people, whether it's current students or alumni."

"Really?"

Himeka replied to Yahiro,

"Until ten or so years ago the school was famous for delinquency. Back it was called Raijin High. Since it became Raira Academy things have improved a lot."

"Oh..."

"Well more importantly, let's get moving. We'll show Yahiro around a bit, then discuss what we're going to do over dinner, okay?"

Kuon clapped Yahiro and Himeka's shoulders, smiling.

Following his plan, the trio set off.

They had yet to notice.

That there was a silhouette behind them, eying them with purpose.

And that there was more than one.



30 minutes later. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

"It's quite deserted here, huh."

It was a street some distance from downtown.

They were passing by after visiting a tour spot; and Yahiro was surprised upon seeing this road.

"I guess so. Sometimes just a few streets away it feels like a different city altogether; it's a common thing, not just in Ikebukuro. And depending on what time it is places can change a lot too."

"I see..."

For Yahiro, life up to middle school had been restricted to his village.

As he was accustomed to all of the places in the village, no matter where he went he could always identify the place as local, but as he was new to the city environment, just a slight change felt completely different to him.

Yahiro pondered over this drastic difference in population over such a short distance, when—

Suddenly he felt uneasy, and stopped.

"What's wrong?"

Himeka asked, seeing that he had stopped walking so abruptly.

Yahiro did not meet her eyes, simply staring deep into the alley they were walking in.

"Something's... there."

"Hm? What do you mean, something?"

Kuon, hearing this, squinted.

On first appearance, it was a normal, deserted road, but—

"...ah?"

There, in the darkness between two streetlights.

Unlike the commercial district where the street would be lined with shops, the area was completely shadowed.

And in that darkness, was something of an even darker black.

"What could that be..."

Yahiro strained his eyes further, and saw something coming out from the darkness.

It was a simple full-face helmet, with a tinted visor.

To Yahiro, it was a familiar sight from video sites and the internet.

"...!"

His heart raced.

He could see the mass of 'darker black' inch slowly, slowly towards them.

When light struck it, the dark mass did not reflect anything.

Anyone could tell.

It was a motorcycle.

On top of the fact that it had neither headlights nor a number plate, there was a 'being' clad in a pitch black rider suit

straddling it.

The being was wrapped in shadow such that only the helmet it wore was apparent; giving the impression of a disembodied head floating in the darkness.

There was no need to wonder what it was.

“Oi, are you serious...?” Kuon, realising, mumbled under his breath—

While Himeka, standing beside Yahiro, identified it out loud, sweat gathering in her palms.

“The Headless... Rider...”

Her eyes were wide, and her breathing had quickened.

Yahiro saw her swallow fearfully, and through his own nervousness he asked,

“Tatsugami-san... Are you okay?”

Yahiro heard the slight quaver in his own voice, and realised he was on edge. Yahiro and Himeka wore the same expression but there was a fundamental difference.

It was concealed by his more ostensible shock, but at Yahiro’s core were ‘jubilation’ and ‘hope’.

Whereas the emotion sequestered behind Himeka’s gaze: was clear ‘hatred’ and ‘terror’.

The reason he had come to Tokyo was before him.

The suspect for the kidnapping of her family members was before her.

Neither Yahiro nor Himeka had imagined this being would show itself to them so easily.

The Headless Rider.

A walking urban legend.

That said, no one knew if it was truly alive.

There were those who said it was the vengeful spirit of a motorcyclist killed in an accident.

There were those who said it was a grim reaper.

There were those who said it was a kind of faerie; a dullahan.

There were those who said it was simply a performance artist.

There were those who said it was cursed motorcycle that had developed its own will.

There were those who said it was a prank by students.

There were those who said it was a stunt by the TV station.

There were those who said it was a disruptive work of art by an artist group.

There were those who said the Headless Rider never existed in the first place.

It was fantastical being, yet it existed incontrovertibly in reality.

Even if there was a somewhat unusual side to them, the trio of students were in the end no more than simply human students. Before this trio who could be no more rooted in reality, this being revealed itself.

“Oi... You’re kidding, right?”

Kuon broke out in cold sweat as he said this, but Yahiro’s reason anchored himself.

“Is that... the real thing?”

“You can tell, right? I mean, yeah, there’ve been fakes before, but...”

When Yahiro glanced at Himeka, her expression was unchanged from before, but her body was wracking with fine tremors.

Seeing this, Yahiro was able to speak with surprising calmness.

"What's the plan."

"Huh?"

"Do we run?"

"Ah..."

Grounded by her calmer friend, Himeka recovered her own cool.

"It's fine, thanks."

She swallowed again, and tamed her breathing.

Her fingers tightening into fists, quietly, she continued to watch the Headless Rider come towards them.

"..."

Kuon looked between Himeka and the Headless Rider, and blurted,

"Huh? Wait, are you serious... It's coming straight for us, isn't it? What now, if we're running that's fine, but if you want to talk, what are we going to say?"

It might have been because he was from Tokyo and had at least heard of the Headless Rider before, but Kuon was not as afraid as he could be.

But to Yahiro this was a mythical urban legend, and more importantly, to Himeka, this was the being who had taken her sisters.

With this being in front of her, it would be normal to think:

'It's here to take the last of the three sisters.'

Yahiro had also understood that, and naturally he took a step forward, as if to defend Himeka.

So that he could act immediately no matter what the Headless Rider were to do.

—But what should we do?

Of course, Yahiro's face was dripping with sweat.

—If it really attacks... Can I hold it off?

He had dealt with regular humans as his opponents countless times before.

Even when his opponent was a gangster with a sword he had been able to handle the situation, scared as he had been.

But it was his first time against someone who could form giant scythes and other weapons from writhing shadows.

If, like the online videos showed, the Headless Rider were to brandish that kind of weapon, in what way should he dodge—

As he imagined the outcome should he fail to evade it, a shiver ran down Yahiro's spine.

The cowardly boy focused his awareness to the utmost in that instant, and thought furiously of counterstrategies to various situations.

But his thinking was stopped for a time.

Because what the Headless Rider did as it arrived two metres from them exceeded his predictions completely.

'Um, excuse me.'

From the rider suit reflected no light and could well be called darkness itself, the Headless Rider took out a smartphone—typed Japanese into it, and thrust it towards them.

'Can I have a moment? I'm not inviting you to any weird religion, and it won't take much time.'

“... ”

“... ”

“...eh?”

Kuon and Himeka's faces had stiffened and they were silent, while Yahiro's brain had also blanked out.

Before Yahiro returned to reality it was a few seconds until he realised he was the one who had let out the “eh?”.

This supernatural creature, the Headless Rider, was holding a smartphone, a civilised tool.

The glossy touchscreen shone as if to advertise her in the middle of the darkness that absorbed all light.

“Um...”

It took the wind out of Yahiro's sails since he had been sure an attack was imminent, but even so, he told himself it could well be a deliberate act to lower their guard, and, still vigilant, he replied.

“Um, what is it?”

‘Ah, excuse me, actually, there's something I need to ask that girl.’

With this somewhat businesslike statement, it then showed Himeka its next question:

‘That is, you're Tatsugami Himeka-san, right?’

“!”

Taken by surprise, hesitation flashed across Himeka's face—

But within seconds she registered the meaning of those words, and glowered warily at the Headless Rider.

“Are Nee-san and Ai... safe?”

Thinking that perhaps it was here to abduct her as well, or to deliver the ransom conditions, Himeka spoke with a challenging tone.

“What... are you here for?”

Her words alone would lead one to think she was calm as always, but Yahiro noticed that her voice was trembling.

In response, the Headless Rider waved its hands anxiously, and from afar it showed them the screen.

‘Please don't misunderstand. I had the feeling you would say that, but...’

It seemed to have expected this degree of distrust, and keeping the 2-metre distance between them, it continued to type in words in an especially large font.

‘Please don't run away yet.’

“...?”

‘Let me say this first. Regarding the kidnapping incidents, I am innocent.’

In this way, the Headless Rider declared its innocence.

The trio exchanged glances, speechless at the dubiousness of the situation.

“Oh? Haven't seen that in a while...” A passing cyclist, most likely a long-time denizen of Ikebukuro, mumbled this under their breath as they went past the Headless Rider.

Amidst this hostile atmosphere, Himeka spoke a single word.

“No...”

‘I'm telling the truth; I don't remember doing anything like that.’

“That can't be, my sisters, they...”

Her voice was worked up, but even then her expression had hardly changed.

It was likely that instead of anger and fear alone, she was confused at the Headless Rider's sudden appearance and

friendly manner.

‘That’s why I’ve come to meet you, Tatsugami Himeka-san.’

“Eh...?”

‘Could you tell me exactly... what happened to your sisters?’

And then—the Headless Rider said something completely beyond them.

‘I want to help to find them, too.’

After a beat, Kuon, who had gone silent thus far, spoke up.

“Wait, nononono! That’s just weird!”

“Kuon-kun?”

“W, wait, slow down! Let’s just calm down, okay?”

“You’re the most agitated person here, Kuon-kun.”

Ignoring Yahiro’s calm assertion, Kuon summarised the situation with a spiel of words.

“What’s going on here! We were supposed to look for the Headless Rider, right?! But now the Headless Rider’s the one looking for us and here already!”

Kuon, riled up, turned to Yahiro and Himeka, and continued rambling.

“And then just as we’re thinking, ‘Uhyaa, it’s true that the Headless Rider kidnaps you if you go looking for it! We’re done for~!’, just as you’re thinking that, the Headless Rider starts chatting with you with a smartphone?! And that’s the latest model! Is this the real thing?!”

“Their clothes absorb light and the engine has no sound; there’s no doubt. I don’t think a fake could reproduce that, and even if it’s an imposter, the bike looks real, and it seems worth it to talk to someone related to the real Headless Rider.”

“Wow you’re really calm Yahiro?! You’re not angry?!”

“...”

Kuon shook his head bewilderedly, and watching this, Yahiro was silent for a moment.

—Ahh, there it is again.

—It’s, that thing... Kuon-kun feels fake.

Occasionally he would feel his friend’s unnaturalness, but he had not expected that it would still be present in this situation.

In the end, unable to discern Kuon’s purpose, Yahiro could only let it be.

‘Actually, it helps me a lot if you’re calm.’

Conversely, the Headless Rider, seemingly oblivious to Kuon’s unnaturalness, bobbed its helmet in a miniature bow, and showed Yahiro this message.

‘Thanks. You’re not surprised, so you must be local, right?’

“No, I’m...”

Unable to confess that he had come here from Akita to meet it, Yahiro responded weakly, mind busy.

—What now.

—It’s not what I expected.

Yahiro felt the collage of impressions he had accumulated about the Headless Rider up till now collapsing, but abruptly, he remembered:

—Ahh, but...

—It feels in line with the Headless Rider Awakusu-san and Mairu-sempai talked about at the dojo before.

—And...

He felt the pain of his injuries that should have healed already, and recalled what Heiwajima Shizuo had said.

—“That person wouldn’t do anything to make anyone cry, let alone kidnap.”

—Yeah, if Heiwajima-san was right, this situation makes sense.

Yahiro was able to accept it, but Himeka, on the other hand, was in turmoil.

Probably due to her natural personality she was not panicking, but although her face was usually blank as steel, now there was obvious discomfort in her eyes.

“What’s going on, you weren’t the one who...”

‘It really wasn’t me. I don’t have any evidence, but please believe me.’

“Then you should tell the police later.”

‘I don’t have a driving license, so it’s hard to talk to the police. I don’t want to get arrested for something I didn’t do, either.’

The Headless Rider shrugged, and continued seriously,

‘I want to help the victims so I can clear my name. And if there’s an imposter of me around, I have to get rid of them.’

The full-face helmet concealed the Headless Rider’s expression. Perhaps there was no expression to be seen in the first place, if the rumours were true.

Even so, to Yahiro, it was as if the Headless Rider was saying this very seriously.

Or perhaps it was that the trio were already thinking the same thought about the ‘urban legend’ before them.

—It’s nice.

—It’s... way friendlier than expected!

“Um, anyway, what did you want from Tatsugami-san?”

In the end it was Yahiro, the calmest one present, who asked this, and the helmet of the Headless Rider nodded as it began to type something.

However—

From afar there was the rewing of motorcycles, and quickly the source grew closer towards them and came into sight.

“Eh?”

Looking closely there were three motorcycles in a line, meandering forth bit by bit in a manner akin to the fluid motion of a dragon.

“Bosozoku?”

Kuon stepped towards the curb to avoid any trouble —

But the motorcycles slowed down to a stop precisely in front of them, in a semicircle formation.

Then the three people alighted from their vehicles.

The person who had been on the foremost bike was a man about twenty years old, and the other two were girls.

However, for an instant Yahiro thought all three were girls.

All three had their helmets off and fastened around the back of their necks, their faces exposed, but the man in front



was a beautiful man with a feminine face, and a portion of his shiny black hair was tied back. Because of his alert observation Yahiro had noticed the person was male from his hip structure and the faint protrusion of his Adam's apple, but anyone else would probably have mistook him for a woman.

"...Geh."

While Yahiro was noticing this, Kuon was more concerned about something else of the three newcomers. Their motorcycles shared the same decal.

The design resembled the white skeleton of a snake, but looking closer one could spot legs and conclude it was in fact the fleshless remains of a dragon.

"...Dragon Zombie."

"Yep, that's right."

At Kuon's darkening expression, the man at the head of the group chuckled as he said this.

On closer inspection there was a dragon tattoo inked around his neck; despite his kindly face, he emanated the air of someone clearly on the wrong side of the law.

He glanced at the Headless Rider, and then focused his gaze on Yahiro.

"?"

Feeling the man's scrutiny, Yahiro put himself on guard.

As he did so, the man turned to the two women behind him, and asked, casually,

"This kid?"

"Yeah, that's him, Li-pei."

"He's the one we told you about."

The women nodded and replied in succession, and the man they called Li-pei grinned and turned back to Yahiro.

"All right, hello~."

"Huh... Ah, yeah, hello."

Behind Yahiro, who had bowed his head and returned the greeting automatically, Himeka was mumbling under her breath, "Eh? A man?" Most likely she had not realised Li-pei was male until hearing his voice.

"Nice to meet you. Ahh, it must be some kind of strange fate that the Headless Rider's here to see our first meeting."

The man glanced towards the Headless Rider again, before addressing Yahiro; but for all of his nonchalance the following words were like cold water over Yahiro's head.

"So. I heard you're strong."

"Eh?"

"Strong enough to take on even Heiwajima Shizuo?"

# Chapter 5B

## The Genius

Along Kawagoe Highway. Shinra's apartment. Underground carpark.

Rewind a few days back.

"You've gotten a grip on the situation?"

'...yes.'

In a corner of the deserted carpark, a man spoke to a woman in a rider suit who stood in front of him.

"And do you have any comment?"

'Please believe me, I didn't do it!'

"I know. That's what I'd like to believe, too."

A sharp-eyed man in a suit.

His name was Shiki. His official occupation was selling paintings.

But that occupation was no more than a front, and this man was better known in the city for his work in the underworld.

It was not that his face was particularly surly, but if one could catch glimpses of his tattoos under his suit, and if they observed the air around him, by gut they would be able to tell he was not a lawful citizen.

Officer of the Awakusu-kai under Medei group: Shiki.

That was his true occupation, and the woman in front of him was a longstanding colleague in his underworld career.

"You understand the situation? If we are to continue to work together, you have to prove your innocence to the public in some way."

'I know.'

"It's not ideal for the public to be suspicious of you. Considering we do business with you, it's inconvenient for us, you understand. If this persists, even if we are absolutely certain of your innocence, we will, nonetheless, have to cut ties."

In the first place, he was clearly from an organisation one would be better off cutting ties with.

But the woman in the rider suit was unable to do so for her own reasons.

"In other words, we cannot provide you information or clean up after you until this is resolved. Of course, it is physically impossible to make you disappear... so in the worst case we will have to inform the police of your address and have them eliminate you for us. We hope that you will cooperate in finding the truth so it does not come to that."

His wording bordered on unreasonable, but the woman in the rider suit did not reply.

Even so, Shiki sighed deeply, and continued less sternly,

"This is not work-related, but I have a personal request."

'What is it?'

"One of Miss Akane's friends has been abducted."

'!'

"Naturally, as you are her benefactor, Miss Akane is upset that you are under suspicion... I realise you've only just

returned, but could you try to prioritise this case over your job?"

The woman in the rider suit bowed her helmet forward in a wordless reply.

The man from the underworld organisation, acknowledging her answer, smiled self-deprecatingly as he turned his back on her.

"Thank you. I will email what information I have to Doctor Kishitani. I hope we can continue our smooth relations with you."

He was not a lawful member of society.

With violence and other kinds of 'power', bending the ethics of society to its will.

That was the kind of world Shiki was steeped in, and his source of income.

But even from the perspective of a man like this, the woman was an otherworldly being.

For the one who stood before Shiki was the 'urban legend', who even while violating the truths of humanity struggled to live in human society—the Headless Rider herself.



Celty Sturluson was no human.

Known as a dullahan, she was a type of fae that originated from Scotland and Ireland – a being that called on the homes of those soon to breathe their last to inform them of their imminent deaths.

With her own severed head under her arm, riding a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a headless horse – known as the cóiste bodhar – she would visit the homes of those nearing death. If one were to carelessly open their door, they would be drenched with a full basin of blood – similar to the banshee, as a harbinger of misfortune, the dullahan was a subject of European folklore passed down the generations

But to the Celty of right now, her history and identity were unimportant.

For—she was now labelled a 'Grim Reaper abducting people' by the masses, for a crime she had no memory of committing.



Along Kawagoe Highway. Shinra's apartment.

30 minutes after the meeting with Shiki.

The Headless Rider Celty Sturluson, who was not only suspected of kidnapping but victim to that information being broadcast on the internet as though it was confirmed fact, was now curled up miserably.

Her roommate, the underground doctor Kishitani Shinra, sat on the sofa with his arms around his knees watching her, and sighed, saying,

"I told you, Celty, you can't let this affect you."

'I can't not be affected. My honour's been tarnished.'

There were all sorts of misinformation spreading on the web, and on top of that there were even posts in bad taste

saying things like, 'Maybe the helmet's actually stuffed with pickled seaweed,' which was actually degrading to both Celty and the seaweed, but in any case it was chaos.

'Why pickled seaweed...'

"It's all right, I'll get a super hacker I know to chop all of your slanderers in two like seaweed."

'What super hacker...'

We met on the internet recently, he's an amazing person, very skilled. He's called Tsukumoya. Anyway I'll ask him to go after all the people badmouthing you, and he can hack into their computers and expose their porn stashes to wherever they work or study."

Ignoring Shinra's proposal for a revenge which would cause excessive trouble to schools and workplaces, Celty clenched her fists and stood up.

'Anyway, I don't care about revenge right now. First we have to clear the misunderstanding... And I'm worried about the missing people, too.'

"You're more worried about others than your own revenge, Celty, your kindness knows no bounds, no wonder you're so popular!"

'That's enough, do you have any ideas?'

"Mm~, Shiki-san sent me the information earlier... It seems the Awakusu-kai have been looking into it on their own, too."

Shinra skimmed the information on the screen of the laptop on the table.

"Out of the recent cases, the most eye-catching is that two sisters vanished together. And the older sister was a magazine reporter who was researching you."

'Me?'

"Yeah, um... Ah, out of three sisters the oldest and youngest disappeared, it seems."

'What about the last one?'

It was an obvious question. Shinra replied, lightly,

"It doesn't say here, so she's probably safe. But if we find out why she wasn't touched it could be a major hint. I'm sure the police have already looked into it, but..."

'Yeah... But we don't know anyone who can ask the police for us... Ah, right, you can ask that super hacker of yours to take a peek at the police's data...'

Celty trailed up, before she slapped the back of her neck and scolded herself.

'Ahh, no no no! What am I thinking, I can't ask someone to commit a crime when I'm trying to solve a crime myself, that's backwards!'

"You're not in a position to say that as a courier without a driving license or headlights, but the fact that you say it anyway is wonderful, too. ...Well, there's no problem there, Celty. Even if you want to see their data, normally files on investigations aren't entered into computers with internet access to prevent leakage."

'Right... Then what should I do?'

"According to Shiki-san's information the second daughter's attending Raira Academy."

Raira Academy.

Celty paused at the name.

Including its past as Raijin High before the merger, it was a school Celty had much history with.

Of course she had not worn the uniform and attended the school, but many of the people significant to her were

graduates. She was also acquainted with a number of current students. It could be said that out of the educational institutes in Japan, it was this high school that she had most affinity with.

"Isn't that just nice? Ryugamine-kun's still a third-year there, since his injury held him back."

Ryugamine.

That name was of an equal weight to Celty as Raira Academy.

Raira Academy third-year student, Ryugamine Mikado. His age was such that he should have graduated by now, but he had suffered numerous stab wounds in an incident, delaying his schooling.\*

"We should get in touch with him somehow."

'Wait. Shinra.'

Celty grabbed Shinra's hand as it reached for his phone, and typed,

'Let's not get Mikado-kun involved again.'

"Celty."

'He's finally been able to go back to a peaceful life. I still think of him as a friend, but precisely because he's my friend I don't want to drag him back to the underworld.'

"You really are kind, Celty. I'm a little jealous of Mikado-kun."

Shinra said. Celty answered, gently,

'Yeah, the only one I'll willingly drag into the underworld is you, Shinra.'

She said this half in jest—

But Shinra's eyes sparkled like a child given a new toy, and he hugged Celty.

"Celty! Ahh, in other words, the two of us are one, and one of us is two. Our bond has become melody and harmony, cat and dogbubububu"

'There's no time for that now!'

She pinched his cheek and pulled, but Shinra said, happily,

"Thank goodness, you're yourself again."

'Anyway, there's already a suitable person who's not Mikado! Someone who caused us lots of suffering!'

"Who? Isn't Izaya missing?"

Shinra asked. Celty answered,

'Aoba, Aoba! Kuronuma Aoba!'

"Ahhh~..."

Shinra's face fell a little.

Evidently he did not think favourably of the boy; he sighed deeply as he took out his phone.

"Honestly, a kid like that who only sees you as a tool to be used should quickly get what he deserves and borrow a giant amount from loan sharks and get overly harassed for repayment and then disappear."

'Don't say something so scary so enthusiastically.'

In the mean time of their banter the call connected, and Shinra spoke, grudgingly,

"Ah... Hello? Is this Kuronuma-kun? Actually, I hate to say this, but I need your help. Can you find a Raira Academy student and pass us her information?"

"Er... All I know is she's called Tatsugami Himeka."



Present time. Somewhere in Ikebukuro.

With that they had received the photograph of 'Tatsugami Himeka' from Aoba, and thus Celty Sturluson was able to stand before Tatsugami Himeka presently.

With the information that the girl was accompanied by a green-haired boy, Celty was able to track her down in just a few days.

But the conversation was not one to be had too publicly, and so she had followed them until they entered a deserted alley before approaching them.

—It would be best to get her alone.

—But she might get scared and run away.

It seemed that Celty's judgement had not failed her; thanks to the boy beside Himeka calming her down, she had managed to converse with Celty somehow.

—First I have to clear up the misunderstanding...

Celty was about to show her the videos from her vacation as alibis to prove she was 100% innocent—

But just then, the Dragon Zombie members came charging in on their motorcycles.

"Let's get along."

Looking at the pretty man with the kind smile, Celty realised instantly.

She had never spoken to him directly, but she had seen him a number of years back.

—Li-pei.

—So he's back.

Ei Li-pei.

A Taiwanese-born, he was the leader of the bosozoku group Dragon Zombie, which had once split the territory of Ikebukuro with Jyan Jyaka Jyan.

She had heard that he had returned to Taiwan to undergo medical treatment from a specialist, but it seemed he had come back to Ikebukuro.

—Izaya said he's descended from the same line as the Ei Family in the Chinese triads, right?

—Well, I don't know if he's still in touch with those distant relatives in China...

Just why was he here now?

If he was here to pick a fight surely he would have brought some of his gang members with him, instead of two women.

—No, I can't rule out that each of them is as strong as Mikage-chan from Rakuei Gym...

Celty wavered, unable to gauge the situation, and meanwhile Li-pei turned his back on her and started talking to the boy standing beside Tatsugami Himeka.

"So. I heard you're strong..."

"Eh?"

"Strong enough to take on even Heiwajima Shizuo?"

—...

—Hm?

—What did he just say?

She had the feeling she had just heard something odd.

It was a name familiar to her being used in an impossible context.

'The sun's pretty cold.' With the sense that she had just heard something to this effect, Celty supposed she might have misheard, and quietly continued to tune into the conversation

Oblivious to the Headless Rider's thoughts, Li-pei proceeded to introduce himself to the boy.

"My name is Li-pei. Ei Li-pei, let's get along."

Li-pei smiled carefreely as he put out his right hand, which the boy took, head tilting curiously.

"Ah, same... I'm Mizuchi Yahiro."

"I'll apologise in advance: I'm sorry, okay?"

"Huh?"

"I'm going to test you a little right now."

And in the following moment, the world of Mizuchi Yahiro spun.

"?!"

Yahiro instantly realised what had been done to him.

His centre of gravity from his position shaking hands with Li-pei had been unbalanced, lurching him towards the ground.

But before he reached that understanding, Yahiro's body had already acted on instinct.

—I was attacked.            —By who?            —Why?

—Out of nowhere.            —I didn't do anything.

—I'm scared.            —Scared scared scared.            —Quickly.

—I have to crush them.            —Before I get killed.            —Before I get killed.

—Before I get killed, before I get killed before I get killed before I get killed—!

In the space of a few seconds countless thoughts rushed through his mind—and Yahiro's body, with no time lag, moved to counter his 'enemy'.

Before his falling body could hit the ground, Yahiro's hand shot out to press against the floor.

And bracing his entire weight on that one hand in a position like a handstand, he twisted his body.

In one liquid motion he spread his legs, and his body turned, legs aiming to snare Li-pei's neck.

"Oh?"

For Li-pei, who had assumed he would deliver a sweeping kick from that handstand as in the footwork-based martial art capoeira, it was unexpected.

He clamped Li-pei's head with his legs almost as if to twist it off, and toppled him sideways.

But Li-pei broke free at the last moment, and stepped back hastily to regain his balance.

On the other hand, Yahiro had taken advantage of his escape to right himself.

Without any pause he ran forward; he eyed Li-pei with a predatory glare, and his body was low to the ground as he travelled across the asphalt.



He was dashing with a crouch start; Li-pei sought to knee him in the face.

But Yahiro had foreseen this, or seen him move and reacted with superhuman reflexes; right before he was hit he straightened and leapt.

His right foot landed on Li-pei's knee, and using it as a lever Yahiro launched himself up.

He was going for the face.

His knee swooped towards the bridge of Li-pei's face—

But Li-pei twisted his body at the last moment, dodging it.

"...!"

Yahiro altered his position midair, and his hand went for Li-pei's neck.

If he was able to get Li-pei into a chokehold he would be able to pin him to the ground.

But depending on how much force he used it was possible that Li-pei's neck would break.

"Whoa!"

Li-pei rolled to the side, evading Yahiro's hand.

He got to his feet quickly, but by that time Yahiro was already incoming.

"...!"

A palm was heading diagonally up towards his chin.

He dodged narrowly, but in that same instant the bottom of a fist swung down diagonally for his brow like a hammer.

"Wait..."

Li-pei dodged by a narrow margin.

Because he could hold off each assault, perhaps to an onlooker Li-pei would seem strong, but—

Li-pei was at the end of his own tether.

Since he had countered the very first surprise attack, he had been forced to remain on the defence.

Even when he had an idea of how to attack, there was no leeway to do so.

—Th, this guy...

Furthermore, Yahiro was not simply relying on physical power to beat him up.

It was clear the moment he differentiated his palm and fist strikes that his strength was no mere boast.

Even when Li-pei attempted to put space between them Yahiro closed the distance.

At this distance so tight neither could even swing their fists for a good punch, where one might predict he might perform a boxing-style clinch, Yahiro twisted his body.

And next Yahiro's neatly folded elbow thrust straight for Li-pei's chin.

Li-pei, sensing that that elbow was as dangerous as any blade, swayed to the side to avoid it—

As if he had been waiting for that, Yahiro's other arm went for Li-pei's throat.

Despite that he was able to parry with his right hand, Li-pei was in fear for his life.

Since the start most of Yahiro's attacks had been at full strength.

Without hesitation or mercy, he had aimed purposefully at vital spots.

Even so, despite his continuous offensive, he showed no sign of tiring.

—There's no mistake!

—He's strong!

—Strong in a different way from Heiwajima Shizuo!

Just how much stamina did he have?

—There was no leeway to even examine the secret to his opponent's strength.

—I thought nearly defeating Shizuo was an exaggeration...

—But if he's this strong, I can accept it...!

—But what an odd kid.

Li-pei was looking at Yahiro's eyes.

The emotion he saw swimming in those narrowed eyes confused him.

—Why... are your eyes so scared, when I'm the one being pushed back?

Despite that he was in the middle of defending himself, a smile rose to his lips.

His complacency was fatal.

He saw Yahiro's leg come up between his open legs, aiming for his crotch.

—Shit.

He narrowly blocked the kick with both hands.

But that was only a feint from Yahiro.

Just as he had yet to recover from his crouched-over position, Yahiro gripped the back of his head with one hand and his chin in the other.

From there he twisted Li-pei's neck, and pushed him to the ground.

If he had been unlucky, it could well have snapped his neck.

Ignoring his instincts, he did not resist as Yahiro pushed him down, so as to prevent his neck from breaking.

Immediately the hands released him, and he saw Yahiro lift his foot up.

—Oh no, this is bad.

Every hair on his body stood on end as he realised the bottom of Yahiro's foot was going to stamp down on his face.

—I'm going to di...

Just as Li-pei began to see his life flashing before his eyes, the scene was interrupted by a swathe of black shadows.

"?!"

"!"

Not only Li-pei and Yahiro but everyone present widened their eyes in surprise.

The Headless Rider's shadow had sprouted dark tendrils that shot between Yahiro and Li-pei's prone form, attempting to catch Yahiro's leg before it came down.

"...!"

Instantly he reversed directions, and not only escaped the shadow about to snare his leg, but propelled himself backwards. As if one, two steps would not be enough, Yahiro continued to bound back in the manner of a shrimp in water.

Eventually he came to a stop at the end of the alley, and eyed Cely, the wielder of the shadow, warily.

—Amazing.

Cely, for one, was honestly impressed by Yahiro's physical ability.

—I didn't think he could evade that.

In order to stop the fight that had suddenly broken out, Cely had decided it would be best to immobilise Yahiro, who had been carrying out a one-sided assault.

But to think that faced with this trick she had used on delinquents countless times before, Yahiro had, with the

bearing of a wild animal, dodged successfully...

—Could it be...

—Can he really take on Shizuo?

—Did something happen between he and Shizuo?

—Just what has been happening the past half year...

Unaware that things had only started a few days ago, Celty grew despondent at how much the fabric of society had evolved in their absence.

Even so, she was not necessarily wrong.

As she watched Li-pei get up from the ground, Celty thought further.

—Isn't he someone both Kadota and Izaya had half an eye on previously?

—Bringing him down so easily...

—What on earth?

—Just who... is this boy?

From appearances, Yahiro was no more than the average young man.

Certainly he did not project the kind of frailness Mikado did, but neither did he give the impression of a muscled hulk.

His musculature was hard to tell because of his uniform, but she were to pick a martial art, rather than that of a judoka or wrestler, perhaps he would look more like a boxer or fencer.

She had endless questions, but most important right now was to quell the fight.

—What to do.

—Just try and wrap him up by force?

—That might escalate things...

—He might actually be the first person to escape my shadow so well since the White Bike.

At the thought of her nemesis in the traffic police, a shiver ran down her spine.

Just as she was thinking what to do, the green-haired boy called out to Yahiro.

"Oi! Yahiro! Yahiro! Calm down! Yeah?!"

At the voice, Yahiro's eyes changed imperceptibly.

"Ah..."

In the next moment he swung his head to take a good look around himself, and looking at his own limbs, sorrow took over the wariness in his expression.

Seeing this, the green-haired boy ran up to Yahiro.

"Get a grip, you've won already, right? You won! You did it! Hyu~! Yeah~!"

"..."

The green-haired boy was half-joking, but Yahiro was half in his own world as well.

On the other hand, the young man, having stood up, was being fussed over by the two girls he had brought along.

"I told you, right? You can't do it unarmed."

"This happened all because you got too carried away, okay?"

The girls chided Li-pei blandly, to which he shrugged, answering,

"I'm sorry, it's just as you said, Nee-san-tachi."

*(\*Tachi: plural.)*

Celty took a double take at that.

—... 'Nee-san-tachi'?

—Huh? Wait... Huh?!

The two standing on either side of him were young; they looked like they couldn't be more than girls.

"Did you just say 'Nee-san'?"

Apparently Cely was not the only one thinking this, for the green-haired boy asked Li-pei directly.

"Yeah, that's how it is. It's hard to believe, but I'm younger. I'm 21,"

"22."

"23, actually."



The women waved, hands fluttering, as they stated their ages.

“Huh? Oh, right, I’m Kotonami Kuon.”

Kuon bowed his head and introduced himself automatically.

To the side, Yahiro was still watching Li-pei, faltering.

“Uh, erm... I...”

Yahiro stuttered. Li-pei said to him,

“My bad, sorry for earlier. I admit it’s my loss, so maybe can we stop fighting and get along?”

Li-pei smiled carefreely, as if Yahiro had not tried to crush his face underfoot minutes ago.

“Ah, yeah... I went too far. I’m sorry.”

Yahiro bowed his head sadly, and seeing this, Celty heaved a sigh of relief.

—Is it... over?

—Thank goodness.

Relieved that she could continue her conversation, she turned back to Himeka, who had been watching on with a surprised face, and started typing into her smartphone once more.

‘Things got a little messy, but it’s good that your friend isn’t hurt.’

Perhaps tired out by the commotion, Celty was back to her usual informal tone.

‘Could you let me help find your family members?’



Meanwhile. At the junction.

“Oi... What’s going on now?”

It was a junction some way from the Headless Rider.

There was a group of people peeking at the situation around the corner.

“It’s bad, Horada-san! Even the Headless Rider’s here!”

“S, shut up! Who’s scared of a fake like that! It’s Dragon Zombie that’s the problem!”

“Is the guy who just fought with Ei Li-pei the one who fought Shizuo?”

“Probably. Did you see how he moved? Ei Li-pei’s without his swords today, for sure, but he was like a little kid.”

Gulping, Horada and his gang watched Yahiro’s group.

Half an hour ago they had spotted the green-haired boy from the video by coincidence and started tailing the trio from a distance.

They could have approached and asked for directions from the start, but after all, the person they were after was strong enough to spar with even Shizuo.

If the boy next to him was who they were looking for, a wrong word could send fists flying their way.

While they were mulling over this, the trio had encountered an increasingly strange situation.

Horada’s nemesis, the Headless Rider, had just approached them all of a sudden, when of all things the leader of

Dragon Zombie had turned up with the girls that were usually with him.

Just as they thought a fight had broken out a victor had emerged, and then both sides had cooled down thanks to the Headless Rider's intervention.

From here there was no way to tell what they had been discussing since then.

"This is bad, Horada-san. At this rate the boy's going to be recruited into Dragon Zombie."

"Wait, they were just fighting!"

"But it looks like they're getting along now."

"Whaoohh?!"

He stuck his face out from behind the corner for a peek; indeed there was no longer any ruckus, and the whole group had gathered by the roadside.

"Shit... We have to do something."

After some thought, a despicable smile spread across his face, and he said,

"All right, we're changing targets. Why don't we get his friend first."

"That green guy?"

"Exactly, you've got to kill the merchant to get the horse."

"Does that proverb exist... You seem to be getting some things wrong?"

Ignoring the uneasy mumbling of his underlings, Horada set his eyes on one of the students."Anyway, I can't see very well from here, but..."

As he watched the girl with the long black hair, Horada slowly licked his lips.

"That girl looks completely like my cup of tea... No harm getting a little friendly, right?"



The alley.

"I... cannot believe anything you're saying."

This was what Himeka told Celty expressionlessly, after she had heard all of the explanation and gone quiet for a while.

'That is understandable. But other than alibis I have no other way to prove my innocence.'

"But... I will cooperate. For my sisters' sakes."

'I see! Thank you so much!'

"No, I should thank you. I hope we can work together."

Himeka bowed her head slowly.

Yahiro did not know what she was feeling.

Himeka was not the kind to express her emotions on the surface, so most likely not just Yahiro, who was bad at socialising, but anyone would have difficulty reading her.

"That's an interesting conversation."

Li-pei, who had been watching them from the side, shrugged as he said this.

"If I find out anything I'll pass it on. Could I have your number, maybe?"



Li-pei asked Yahiro and Celty casually. Celty, puzzled, returned with her own question,

'Why? This has nothing to do with Dragon Zombie, right?'

"Nah, I'd be lucky to have you owe me a favour, that's all. I get that you don't want to get involved with bosozoku, but you're shorthanded right now, aren't you?"

"But I..."

"You're still angry I attacked you?"

Yahiro shook his head and apologised.

"No, I went overboard, too... I'm sorry."

"It's fine, I said! More importantly—do you like bikes? Don't you think this rider suit is cool?"

"Um, uh, sure..."

Seeing that Yahiro was stumped at what he was trying to say, Li-pei chuckled, and said more frankly,

"Do you wanna join my gang? It's called Dragon Zombie."

"Gang?"

Yahiro tilted his head curiously, and Kuon quickly stepped between them.

"Uh-uh-uh! Sorry, this guy just came down from Akita, so he really doesn't know anything about Ikebukuro... Plus he might be strong but he's a good kid, so I think whole gang gig's a bit much, you know?"

"I didn't ask you...?"

Li-pei looked incredulously at Kuon, and after some thought, he continued to Yahiro,

"I see, so it's like that. I won't force you, okay? I owe you one for today, so call on me whenever if you need something. For now let's just have a fifty-fifty relationship."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Yeah, if you do me a favour I'll help you once, too, and vice versa... something like that. I won't say anything ridiculously like 'go die' or 'give me your girl' or anything."

With that, Li-pei turned back to Celty.

"I want to have that kind of relation with you, too, what do you think?"

'I don't really mind, but all I can tell you is my email.'

Celty found his level-headedness in front of a being like herself curious, but did not hesitate in agreeing to exchange contacts.

"That's enough for me. You get along with Heiwajima Shizuo and Orihara Izaya, right? I was envious that they could make friends with an urban legend."

'No, I wasn't friends with Izaya...'

Just as Celty was typing this denial, Kuon approached her from the side.

"Um... Headless Rider-san... Ah, your name is Celty?"

'Yeah, why?'

"I'd be grateful to have your contacts, too, so would you mind taking a picture together?"

'I don't really mind, but...'

The moment she agreed Kuon was instantly by her side, such that both of them could fit in the picture together.

After taking a fair number, he rejoiced oddly and said to Celty,

"Hyu~! Thanks~! It's okay if I post this on my blog, right?"

'It's one thing after another, huh. ...I guess I'm okay, but the police or other weird people might go after you.'

Celty was used to being photographed so it was no big deal to her, and she was more concerned about him.

"It's all right, I thought of that too. If anything happens I have friends who can help, too."

"Ah, Kuronuma-sempai?"

"What? Who did you just say?"

"Oh! More importantly, we're starting to attract attention!"

Yahiro mentioned a familiar name, but Kuon quickly changed the subject.

Indeed, looking around, they were beginning to attract onlookers watching from a distance.

The Headless Rider was not very unusual for the residents of Ikebukuro, but tourists and the like were taking pictures.

"Yeah, sorry. Contact me later so we can hash out the details."

Deciding that remaining would only cause trouble for the students, Celty quickly exchanged contacts, and got onto her motorcycle.

"Thank you so much. If I find out anything, I'll tell you too."



Ikebukuro. Commercial district.

The group had dispersed from there, and Kuon had gone home first claiming he remembered he had an errand.

Yahiro and Himeka were heading in the direction of the train station for now.

For a while both were silent, but seeing that Yahiro did not know how to start, Himeka spoke first.

"I was surprised. So you're strong."

"T, that was, um..."

"It's all right if you don't want to talk about it. It's not something that bothers me."

Himeka's voice was casual, but Yahiro's spirits fell at the thought that she might be intimidated by him.

He decided to divert the conversation to change the mood.

"The Headless Rider was a good person, huh?"

"...Yeah, it was."

Himeka replied expressionlessly,

"It's all right, if we have the real thing helping us, surely we can find your sisters."

Yahiro said this to encourage her, but Himeka, still expressionless—

Gazing into the distance, she murmured, under her breath,

"But... I still think the Headless Rider's a demon."

"Eh? Why?"

Yahiro asked, surprised. But without turning around, she continued:

"It won't even allow anyone to hate it over a misunderstanding..."

As if she was not answering the question, but speaking for herself to hear.



3 in the morning. Along Kawagoe Highway. Shinra's apartment.

“Welcome back, Celty?!”

‘I’m home. Sorry I’m so late. I was going round looking for information, but I lost track of time.’

Not a moment after she had shown him her smartphone, Shinra hugged her out of nowhere.

“Thank goodness you’re safe, Celty!”

‘Oi let go. What do you mean, safe?’

Normally at this point she would be wresting him off her, but the fact that he had said ‘you’re safe’ felt odd to her, and so she queried,

‘Did something happen?’

“That’s right, Celty. It looks like this case might be more dangerous than we thought.”

‘What do you mean?’

Celty asked seriously. Shinra separated them, and unusually serious himself, he answered.

For Celty, it was an answer nigh on impossible to believe immediately.

“I just got a call from Akabayashi-san...”

“He said they’ve just lost contact with Shiki-san, too...”

# Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ④

Ikebukuro Information Site, IkeNEW! Version IkeBUKURO

Popular article, *'End of the Urban Legend'—The Headless Rider is Ridiculously Friendly—'But in a Different Way'*

*'I became friends with the Headless Rider —(from a personal blog)*

"I met the Headless Rider in Ikebukuro coincidentally!

They were really nice!

They're like your super average citizen, and we even took a photo together!

Apparently their favourite food is suzu castella\* and they're a fan of Hanejima Yuhei!

(\*Small sugary cake snack)

We talked a lot about recent dramas and even went to karaoke, I learned a lot about them~.

It's kinda amazing.

I feel humbled.

Even though when I tried talking to them they were completely normal person.

They even read comics like normal people, apparently.

And they said in the past half year they won a lucky draw and went to Hawaii!

That mean there's an alibi, right?

They couldn't have kidnapped anyone when they were in Hawaii.

They said they're having a really hard time because of all these weird rumours, too!

But seriously, I can show off to all my friends now.

Maybe I can even introduce them.

Wouldn't it be cool to form a Headless Rider club or something?"

—(Original blog deleted)

*IkeNEW!* Administrator's Comment

"They're super friendly now they're back, huh-nari?"

The latest development in the serial kidnapping scandal...

This boy so boldly asked for all this personal information and even took a picture, but he wasn't kidnapped-nari.

If the boy doesn't go missing after this, that would mean the rumour about the Headless Rider being a kidnapper is fake after all-nari.

So, how do all of you who were cheated by the rumours feel-nari? How does it feel-nari?

So it turns out the Headless Rider's ridiculously normal-nari.

It makes us wonder if there really is nothing under that helmet-nari.  
 If they're in the registry like a normal person, they could sue people calling them the kidnapper for defamation-nari.  
 Well, I think before that they would get arrested for traffic violations-nari.  
 By the way, I've covered the boy's eyes to protect his privacy-nari.  
 But well, there can't be that many green-haired high schoolers in Japan though-nari!  
 No matter how much you flame I won't stop with the 'nari'-nari.  
 Fighting the slanderers flaming people's sentence-endings again today."

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

Turns out they're ridiculously nice.

- Haven't they always been pretty friendly? There were always people riding behind them.
  - But what is the IkeNEW admin saying now after spreading rumours so furiously earlier...
    - Not apologising for their own gossip is this site's trademark.

Call the police.

- It's not confirmed the Headless Rider's the kidnapper yet.
  - No, I mean for driving without headlights.
    - Ah, yeah, that's wrong.

By the way, what if the Headless Rider really is innocent?

- If so, then the question will be who the actual kidnapper is.
  - If the people who disappeared were really looking for the Headless Rider, the culprit could be someone with a grudge against the Headless Rider.
    - Why would you kidnap people then?
      - To frame the Headless Rider, right?
        - It would have to be a huge grudge if someone went that far.
  - If so, that means the missing people won't be coming back, will they?
    - Yeah, I guess. Since if they came back the Headless Rider's innocence would be proven.
      - Rest in peace.
        - You're being insensitive.
        - Sorry.
- This Headless Rider is fake. Please stop spreading the picture.
  - I think it's the real thing? The rider suit doesn't reflect any light, too.
    - It could be an edited photo. It's fake.

- Would it trouble you if it's real?
  - I've blocked you.
    - Huh? Just like that?
      - That's extreme...
        - Looks like this person's really disturbed by the idea it could be real.
          - Maybe he's the actual kidnapper.

※The account of the original poster was deleted afterwards.

Where's the original blog in this article? I couldn't find it.

- You're right, I can't either. I wonder where it is.
  - He was right to delete. It would be bad if his school found out or something.
- Actually, I've seen him around Ikebukuro a lot recently.
  - Yeah, there's been that boy with the gaudy hair walking around.
    - By the way, I've seen him with Blue Square.
      - Wait, they're still around?
        - The Dollars are completely gone, right?
          - Dollars? There was a gang like that?
            - Seriously? It hasn't even been two years.
              - Normal people don't remember the names of bosozoku.
                - No! They're colour gangs, not bosozoku!

I hope it isn't really the Headless Rider

- Why?
  - It'd be kind of disappointing if the Headless Rider was just an average person, right?
 

It's scientifically impossible for the Headless Rider to be actually headless, you realise.

    - But still, it's nice to have that possibility.
      - What about thinking of it as a supernatural creature that understands language?
        - That's like finding out your idol wears lame clothes when they're off work...
          - What's wrong with that.

I saw that green-haired boy who took pictures with the Headless Rider at the convenience store just now.

- Which store?
  - I'm not sure if I should say here. If you follow me I can send a PM.
    - I've followed you.

(There were no public updates afterwards.)





# Chapter 6A

## The Visitors

The next day. Raira Academy.

“Good morning.”

“...Good morning.”

Himeka returned Yahiro’s greeting, voice no different from usual.

“Yesterday must have been hard on you.”

“Yeah, I haven’t sorted it all out yet.”

“...”

Yahiro wanted to ask her about what she had said yesterday before they parted, but felt that it might be too intrusive and hesitated.

“Do you still think of the Headless Rider as a demon?”

But his hesitation did not lead to restraint, and in the end he asked her anyway.

If Yahiro was the kind of boy who could be sensitive to this situation, he would probably have handled his childhood better.

“...You really are frank.”

Himeka, however, did not appear particularly unhappy about it.

She had probably come to understand this side of Yahiro through their interactions in the past few days.

“It might have been better, and easier to accept, if the Headless Rider was the culprit.”

“But if our enemy was someone who could control those weird shadows we wouldn’t be able to rescue the people who were kidnapped.”

“Yeah, that might be true.”

Himeka said lightly. Yahiro did not know how to answer.

“But then...”

“But, Yahiro-kun, I’m thinking...”

“Eh?”

Himeka turned and walked forward, and still, with a voice that could not be more casual, continued:

“If the Headless Rider is so friendly, if you’re interested in it, if you’ve researched... you’d be even more willing to follow it, wouldn’t you?”

“Ah...”

“Even to a deserted area, or deep in the mountains, anywhere.”

“I... guess so.”

The line of reasoning Himeka expressed did make sense.

Just by her words alone he was able to realise she was still suspecting the Headless Rider.

Yet Yahiro was unable to accept that what Himeka had murmured yesterday, that she thought the Headless Rider was a demon, stemmed from this suspicion alone.

—Ngh... What now. I'm bad at these situations.

—If Kuon were here he'd be able to ask all kinds of questions. He really is great.

—I wish I had his skill to push conversations forward.

Yahiro had judged Kuon as a social person despite that he had isolated himself from others by dyeing his hair green. He continued the conversation casually as they walked towards their classroom.

And when homeroom period came around, he noticed something odd.

A familiar green head was not in the classroom.

—Hm?

—Maybe he's absent.

It was likely he was simply late, but because of what had just happened yesterday, he was disturbed.

In the break after the first period, Yahiro called Kuon.

'The person you just called may have run out of battery or may be in a place without signal — '

This feminine voice answered, only escalating his worry.

Yahiro remembered Kuon's call to him last night:

—*'Yo. That was exciting.'*

—*'But Himeka-chan really was cold back there.'*

—*'She should have been more... I would've thought she'd say something provocative, like, "Give my sisters back, you kidnapper!" But she was unexpectedly calm, which was a great help.'*

—*'Well, starting tomorrow we should start looking for anyone with a grudge against the Headless Rider.'*

—*'See you in school. I'm going to pop by the store.'*

They had talked about other things, too, but from what Yahiro remembered their conversation had been mostly chit-chat.

Most importantly, he had said he would be coming to school.

It was difficult to believe he had planned to skip school.

A chill ran down Yahiro's spine.

Because he remembered a rumour about the serial disappearances and the Headless Rider.

The rumour that Himeka's sisters had given truth to: that 'people who look for the Headless Rider will disappear'.

—No, wait. This is weird.

—In that case, Tatsugami-san or I should have disappeared first.

Yahiro, bewildered, continued to sit through his lessons after that, engulfed in uneasiness.

When lunch break rolled around he approached Himeka.

"I wonder what happened to Kuon-kun..."

"Did he skip? He doesn't seem the kind to take school seriously."

"That was frank... But I haven't been able to get him on his phone."

"If he didn't skip school... It might be related to the Headless Rider."

Himeka's face darkened slightly as she said it outright.

"I wish it weren't, but... Should we text the Headless Rider?"

Saying this, Yahiro opened his email that he had finally begun using to communicate with his family lately –

But before he could type anything, a voice called out,

"Hey, are you dating, Mizuchi-kun, Tatsugami-san?"

A posse of girls from their class had approached upon seeing them together.

"Not really, we're just hanging out together."

Himeka answered evenly.

There was no dislike or embarrassment; she simply converted the truth in her mind into words.

"Eh~? What about you, Yahiro-kun?"

"Huh? Me?"

Meanwhile, Yahiro's response did not lose to Himeka's in terms of honesty.

"I'd be glad to have such a pretty girl as my girlfriend. But we're not dating, unfortunately."

"That was half confessing, wasn't it!"

"Really?"

"It was! You're so funny!"

Yahiro tilted his head in confusion as if it were not he himself who just said that, and thinking it was a joke, the girls began to laugh.

"Be a little embarrassed, Himeka-chan~"

"You're really interesting, Yahiro-kun."

"Is it an Akita thing?"

"No, that's not it."

He answered that with more certainty than the other questions.

He was different from the people in his village. They, the ones who called him 'monster' – were the normal people.

Such self-loathing thoughts ran through Yahiro's mind. At the same time the girls around them probed further:

"But, uh, Kotonami-kun? That green-haired guy, he's with you a lot, right?"

"Oh? A love triangle?"

"Is he your cup of tea, then, Tatsugami-san?"

Their classmates proposed wilfully, to which Himeka calmly replied,

"Not really, we're just hanging out, too."

"Whoa~, so self-assured~"

Although the girls' teasing was somewhat malicious, Himeka remained unaffected –

But her expression shifted slightly at the next sentence.

The same could be said of Yahiro, however.

"But speaking of Kuon-kun, was that real? The thing with the Headless Rider?"

"Eh?"

Yahiro and Himeka both looked towards the speaker.

"Oh? You don't know? The rumour's been flying around all lunch."

As she said this the girl took out her smartphone, and showed it to them.

"See... The one on the news right now is him, right?"

On the screen was a photo of a boy next to the Headless Rider, with a black box edited over his eyes.

The fact that he had green hair made covering his eyes meaningless, however –  
And Yahiro and Himeka, both of whom did not keep up with current events, came to realise something over the course of their lunch:

Kuon had become the man of the hour.



After school. Rooftop.

“And so you came to me.”

Kuronuma Aoba said as he leant against the guardrail on the roof.

They were on the opposite end from the rooftop garden that students used as a recreational area.

As there was an installation of solar panels here, it was more or less empty, and even if there was anyone it would not be a model student.

Because Raira Academy did not have a significant population of ‘delinquents who looked like delinquents’, the rooftop was open for access – but in this area around the solar panels there was a unique tension not to be found elsewhere.

“Yeah, I was thinking you might know something, Kuronuma-sempai.”

Yahiro, for all he was afraid of this atmosphere, pressed Aoba with his questions.

“I can’t believe he went so far as to say the Headless Rider’s favourite food is suzu castella, though. That was too much.”

Aoba answered his junior with good humour.

“Well, if you’re asking about where he is, I’d like to know myself. I called him the moment I saw that article.”

“Did he pick up?”

“No, either his battery was out or there was no signal...”

He cut off there, and, lips quirking, continued,

“Maybe someone brought him to a place with no signal...”

“!”

“If you chase after the Headless Rider, the Headless Rider will abduct you... was it?”

“Are you saying he was abducted by the Headless Rider-san?”

Yahiro blurted anxiously. Aoba narrowed his eyes.

“Oh... Headless Rider ‘-san’, huh...”

“Ah...”

“Could it be you were with Kuon, and met the Headless Rider together?”

“...”

Caught red-handed, Yahiro was temporarily speechless.

But it was as good as confirming Aoba’s conjecture.

“You’re bad at lying, huh.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Yahiro tilted his head, while Aoba answered cheerfully with a faint smile.

"Well, it doesn't matter if you've met the Headless Rider, but there's one thing I can say for sure."

"What is it?"

"The Headless Rider isn't the kind of human to kidnap anyone. ...Though they're not even 'human' in the first place...

But there's no need to complicate things, so let's leave it at that."

"?"

He spoke as if he had been familiar with the Headless Rider for a long time; Yahiro cocked his head.

"You like tilting your head, huh."

"Ah, sorry. There's still a lot of things I don't know about Tokyo..."

"It's nothing to do with Tokyo, but sure. ...Well, it's probably fine to eliminate the Headless Rider from the suspect list.

Even if they had reason to kidnap someone, they wouldn't hurt anyone on purpose."

With a self-deprecating smile, Aoba continued to describe his own impression of the Headless Rider.

"To put it simply. In a nutshell... The Headless Rider is a good guy."

"A good guy?"

"More so than most. They might be driving without a license, but if they see anyone in trouble, they're more likely to step in and help than even regular humans."

"Do you know the Headless Rider, Kuronuma-sempai?"

The question should have been expected, but Aoba smoked through it:

"It's not like we're such good friend you can ask me that, right?"

"With some thought, Yahiro bowed his head obediently.

"You're right. Thank you very much."

"Ah, you didn't argue."

Aoba shrugged, seeming somewhat disappointed.

Just as his junior was about to turn around and leave, Aoba stopped him, saying:

"Oh right. There's one more piece of information I can give you."

"?"

"Do you know where Kuon lives?"



Evening. Somewhere in Takadanobaba.

"So this is... Kuon-kun's home..."

Yahiro murmured, looking up at the building.

Yahiro, having gotten Kuon's address from Aoba, had decided to visit with Himeka after school.

Despite his hopes that it was just a cold that kept him from school, Yahiro could not repress his fears.

The apartment building was a fair distance from the Takadanobaba station, and was taller than the neighbouring buildings; from the roof one could probably see most of the city.

As a building more than thirty years old, the security at the gate was lax, and there might not even have been a

camera at the entrance.

Looking at the building, Himeka voiced her impression:

"It's big, but it looks rather old."

"Really?"

Yahiro asked automatically when Himeka said this.

Having come here from a village with no apartments to speak of in the first place, he was unable to differentiate between new and old buildings very well.

There were no cracks in the walls or anything; it did not look especially old compared to their school.

"Yeah... If a place so big was built recently, I don't think we'd have free access all the way to the front door."

With this, Himeka moved towards the interior of the building.

Still, there were no security measures; the model of the apartment was such that couriers could deliver goods straight to the door.

As they stood in the lift, the two of them discussed what they should say once they were at the door.

"What are we going to tell his family?"

"He was absent from school today, so we can just say we're here to return a book to him."

Himeka took out a book from her bag as she said this.

It was a book she had been reading occasionally during lesson breaks and such.

The title was *Ikebukuro Fights Back*.

"What book is that?"

"It's an introduction to Ikebukuro. The writer is Tsukumoya Shinichi; there are some detailed sections on the Headless Rider."

"Oh..."

He had looked up information about the Headless Rider back in Akita, but that was mostly on the internet, and he had not thought of looking for books.

He ought to borrow it later, or buy it himself.

While Yahiro was thinking this, the lift came to a stop at Kuon's floor.

'Kotonami

Nozomi Kuon'

This was written on the nameplate beside the apartment door.

"His... mother, maybe?"

'Nozomi' was most likely a woman's name.

In that case perhaps Kuon was living with his mother.

As he considered that, Yahiro pressed the doorbell.

They waited for a while, but there was no response.

"...Maybe no one's home."

"Should we go back?"

Yahiro was about to agree with Himeka –

But suddenly he froze and looked towards the door.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone's there."

"Eh?"

Himeka faltered at Yahiro's sudden statement.

But Yahiro leant his face closer to the door, and spoke such that anyone inside could hear:

"Excuse me, I'm Kuon-kun's classmate, Mizuchi."

He knocked lightly on the door, but still there was no response.

"Could you have mistaken?"

"No, I heard footsteps."

Due to Yahiro's unique brand of timidity and the magnificent history that had resulted from it, he possessed senses twice as acute as most people.

They had been numbed for a time due to the sheer crowdedness of Tokyo and the unfamiliar environment, but as he grew used to it his senses had regained their sharpness.

Armed gangsters closing in on him from behind or from the shadows.

Yahiro had detected faint sounds from nearby with that same sense of someone 'holding their breath', and concentrated further.

In doing so, he had heard something through the door, and realised that someone was inside.

"What should we do... I'm sure there's someone... but why aren't they replying...?"

"A thief?"

"...Possibly."

In the worst case it could be the kidnapper, here to abduct Yahiro as well.

Yahiro, visualising Kuon's corpse sprawled on the floor inside, began to panic.

"Should we call the landlord to open the door for us?"

"...There's no way the landlord would open up just because we said we heard footsteps inside."

Himeka calmly stared at the doorknob for a while –

And, sighing softly, said to Yahiro expressionlessly,

"This kind should be workable."

"Kind as in?"

"Keep a lookout."

"Huh?"

—For what?

Before he could ask, Himeka had taken out two slim metallic objects from her bag, and begun rattling at the lock.

"Eh... Ehhh?!"

At the sight of what Himeka was doing, Yahiro's face paled and he flustered.

"Wait... Tatsugami-san?!"

"It's open."

"But... Ehhhh?!"

Yahiro swallowed; he had broken out in sweat. Even so, Himeka was unaffected as she put her hand on the doorknob, her face utterly placid.

"...I'm opening the door."

“...S, sure.”

Deciding to postpone his questions for now, Yahiro looked towards the door nervously. In the next moment, Himeka opened the door.

And –

No one was inside.

“...Eh?”

Had he been mistaken?

That was Yahiro’s first thought, but his eyes caught something crouched in the corridor, wiggling.

“...”

More accurately, rather than wiggling, it was shivering behind an ornamental plant.

“Um, excuse me. We’re friends of Kuon-kun...”

Realising it was a woman, Yahiro chose to offer a proper greeting first.

“Are you Kuon’s mother?”

At that, the shivering figure – a woman with thick glasses – peeked out from behind the plant, and, looking up at him, stuttered shakily,

“Do... Do I look that old...”

The woman with the gloomy aura stood slowly with a hand on the wall to support her, and looked warily towards Yahiro and Himeka.

“W, wasn’t it... locked? How is it open...”

“We jiggled the knob a bit and the door just opened. It might have been broken.”

Himeka replied smoothly with this outrageous lie.

Yahiro’s eyes grew round and he was staring at her, but with a cool expression she asked the bespectacled woman,

“I’m sorry if it shocked you. Are you related to Kotonami-kun?”

With fearful eyes, the woman introduced herself:

“K, Kotonami Nozomi.”

“I, I’m Kuon’s... older sister.”



A few minutes later.

Yahiro and Himeka, who had been led to the living room and served snacks, had been exchanging glances, unsure what to say.

But being that the other party was sitting with her legs curled to her chest while pouring the tea, neither had been able to find an opportunity to speak up.

Just then, Kotonami Nozomi spoke in a tiny voice, without making eye contact,

“You must be, Mizuchi Yahiro-kun, and Tatsugami Himeka-chan.”

“!”



Yahiro was surprised she knew his full name although he had only introduced himself as 'Mizuchi'. Himeka asked expressionlessly,

"Why do you know our names?"

"Of course I know. You're the friends of my cute little brother."

At the sight of Nozomi, who was smiling while still averting her eyes, Yahiro was somewhat disconcerted.

But without a hitch he accepted that the capital probably had people like this too, and continued the conversation without dwelling on it.

"Um, actually, Kuon-kun didn't come to school today, so..."

"Yeah, I know."

"Eh? So he was absent for a reason, right?"

"Yeah, there's a reason."

As she sipped at her own tea a dark smile spread over her face, and she said, happily,

"He was abducted last night."

"...?" "He was abducted; kidnapped. My brother Kuon."

"What..."

She said it so blandly Yahiro thought it was a joke, but he started as he remembered their earlier exchange.

"T, Then, you didn't open the door just now because you thought we were the kidnapper?"

"Not really? I'm scared of strangers. I don't open the door unless it's Kuon or a deliveryman."

"? ???"

Unable to understand what she meant, Yahiro turned to Himeka.

Himeka, calm as ever, asked Nozomi quietly,

"...It doesn't seem like you've contacted the police about this, hm."

"Yeah. I haven't. Kuon would get in trouble, and I'd hate for the police to come into the house."

She was swaying back and forth, and even now she was shivering slightly.

"Honestly, it's already very stressful that people I've never met before are in the house right now, you know? I feel bad about my situation, especially since you've come all the way down..."

Gaze hovering at some point in the air, Nozomi took out a notepad and pencil, and pushed it across the table towards them.

"C, could you write your phone number here? Any one of you."

"?"

—So she's asking us to leave our contacts and go home?

—Well, we did break in, so that's to be expected.

Yahiro interpreted the situation in this way, and with a look at Himeka, he wrote his own number and passed back the notepad.

"Th, thanks. Drink the tea. There are snacks in the fridge, so just eat, okay?"

"Er, huh?"

Yahiro, who was expecting to be sent home, tilted his head in confusion.

Then Nozomi practically crawled out of the room, and slipped into her own room down the corridor.

"What's happening... What should we do now?"

"Dunno..."

The two were exchanging glances when suddenly Yahiro's phone rang.

"Huh?"

Yahiro was surprised that an unknown number was calling, but nevertheless he picked up.

And then –

'Yaho~! Doing good? Ah~, I'm so sorry we couldn't talk properly just now!'

Only to hear the same voice that had been in the living room just now.

'Ah~, we can finally talk! I'm really bad at talking face-to-face, see! I get so nervous I can't talk properly! I'm really sorry! It's not that I don't like you! Actually I love you! I love you both very much!'

It was the same voice; yet so spirited it was hard to think of as the same person.

"Um... Nozomi-san?"

'Yep, it's me. Ah, do you know how to switch to speaker mode? So Himeka-chan can talk too.'

"Sorry, I don't know how."

After that, with some explanation, Yahiro was able to activate this new function of his phone successfully.

'Hello~? Himeka-chan, can you hear me?'

"Yes, I can."

"OK~! I can hear you too!"

Apparently by projecting the call through the speakers one could have a normal conversation. Yahiro was relieved, but in the end he could only wonder whether it qualified as a normal conversation.

After all: the other party was only a room away.

'I'll introduce myself again! Kotonami Nozomi! Kind of a shut-in, but I handle all the household expenses, so I'm not a NEET! I pay Kuon's school fees and living expenses, too.'

"Are you a writer, then?"

Himeka said the first thing that came to mind upon hearing that she was a shut-in with a job, but was promptly rebuffed.

'Nope, I'm not! Ah, but I guess it's something like that, since I use a pen name and write articles!'

"Pen name?"

'Yep, you can call it a handle, but since I'm writing, maybe pen name sounds better after all!'

Then she uttered a specific name across the receiver:

'Have you heard of... Lila Tailtooth Zaiya?'

Lila Tailtooth Zaiya.

It was an odd name and it was hard to tell what country it could be from, but Yahiro had the feeling he had seen it before.

—Huh?

—I feel like I saw that name somewhere today...

Before Yahiro could place the memory, Himeka spoke up.

"...the 'IkeNEW' admin, right?"

'Bingo! You're absolutely right!'

"Ah –"

Yahiro exclaimed as he remembered.

He remembered that during the lunch break his classmates had showed him a website that had reported on Kuon's photo with the Headless Rider. It was a blog called *IkeNEW*, and the administrator was Lila Tailtooth Zaiya.

"Huh? What? But..."

'Yep. That whole article was a charade by us~. You won't be able to find the original blog, since it doesn't exist! Everyone was completely fooled, isn't that funny?'

"? ? ?"

Question marks were popping up all over Yahiro's head.

A news article based on a fake journal?

Why would you do that?

And spread lies about the Headless Rider at the same time?

Is it really all right for a news site to lie?

In the end, who kidnapped Kuon?

Next to Yahiro, whose mind was occupied with '?'s, Himeka asked over the phone,

"Was it... so he would be kidnapped?"

'...Oh? You're very sharp.'

"..."

'What's wrong? Tatsugami-san. Do you have some idea who the kidnapper is, perhaps?'

To Nozomi, who had said such an odd thing, Yahiro answered, for now ignoring his own doubts:

"She doesn't."

'Why do you say that?'

"If she knew who it was, she could have just told the police."

'I can't believe I just heard something so straightforward and innocent in this day and age!'

Dry laughter came across the receiver; Yahiro tilted his head wondering if he had said something funny.

'Yahiro-kun, you're more interesting than I expected. Who do you think kidnapped all those people?'

Nozomi asked, clearly curious. Yahiro mulled thoughtfully for a while, before answering,

"Yakuza, maybe..."

'And why do you think that?'

"Um, I don't have any basis, exactly... I was kidnapped in the second year of middle school myself, so..."

'...' "..."

Both Himeka and Nozomi went silent.

Both were aware by now that Yahiro was not the kind of person to joke.

But as she did not know why he would be kidnapped, Himeka was completely unable to absorb the information, and even Nozomi, who was somewhat aware of the rumours surrounding him, was left speechless by the sheer extent of what he had said.

"Back then my grandmother talked to someone very important from that group and got me out, but I was very scared all along."

'You really are interesting.'

Then Nozomi said, under her breath:

'I see~, so that's why Kuon's so interested.'

“Um, so in the end, is Kuon-kun safe? You don’t seem very worried.”

For all Kuon’s sister was the victim of this incident, Yahiro voiced his doubt directly. And she answered, nonchalantly:

‘Well, I don’t know if he’s safe, but he has his own plans, I guess?’

‘Since, just as our princess over there said... he got himself kidnapped on purpose.’

# Chapter 6B

## The Watcher

Somewhere in Tokyo.

Rewind to half a day ago – late at night after Yahiro and Celty's meeting.

When the blindfold came off, it was an unfamiliar room that met Shiki's eyes.

From the pile of cardboard boxes and kerosene cans in the corner, and the spades and other tools leaning against the wall, one could imagine this spacious room was part of a villa, and being used for storage.

There were no windows, so it was likely the room was underground.

With these deductions, he looked towards the person who had taken off his blindfold.

His hands had been bound behind his back with box tape, and his legs were similarly restricted.

For all intents and purposes he was helpless to do anything besides seeing and speaking, but even so Shiki did not cry out, instead assessing calmly.

Assessing the kidnappers who had, in abducting him and bringing him here, proven their audacity.

Dressing up in sunglasses, masks and caps in the middle of the city made them all the more conspicuous.

He wanted to tell them to at least wear balaclavas, but decided to remain silent and observe the situation for now.

Just then, in his place, the man fallen at his feet began to yell.

"What are you after, bastards! Don't think you'll get away with this!"

It was Shiki's bald-headed subordinate, the one who usually chauffeured him.

"Quiet."

With one word from Shiki a shiver ran through the man's body, and he turned his eyes towards Shiki.

Like Shiki his limbs were bound, but unlike Shiki, who was sitting, he was lying on the floor.

"A, Aniki! I'm sorry! It's my fault... It's my fault even you ended up here!"

"Don't shout. Call me Manager."

Shiki dismissed his whimpering subordinate, and reflected on what had happened so far.

—Things are getting troublesome.

—Just what is their objective?

About one hour ago.

It was late at night in Tokyo. Shiki, after the meeting, had boarded the car to return to the Awakusu-kai office and report with his chauffeur –

But noticing that the chauffeur had not greeted him as usual, his mind immediately shifted to emergency mode.

Without panicking, he glanced casually at the rearview mirror.

The man in the driver's seat had the same clean-shaven head, but one look and it was obvious he was not the same

person who had chauffeured Shiki to the car park.

For all Shiki was yakuza, he had no reason to be carrying a blade or gun around at the moment, as he was not engaging in any fight.

Violating the arms law would only put his leader at risk now that the laws had tightened.

—Now, whether this is a grudge against my person or a strike against the Awakusu-kai changes things significantly.

—Is it Asuki Group, discontent with the current peace, or some other group we've had friction with...?

—Or someone within the Awakusu-kai, even... It's an unfortunate possibility.

He had checked the doors on both sides to check that he could escape quickly, but was well aware that attempting to run was futile.

Muscled men, their faces concealed by sunglasses and facemasks, were moving towards both sides, and they opened the doors in unison.

"You must be Shiki-san,"

"We'll have you come with us,"

said the men gravely. At the sight of them, Shiki could not help but frown.

It was because the instant he had seen their bearing, a strong sense of unease had come over him.

This uneasiness stemmed from his years of experience in an underworld organization – but Shiki was unable to ignore it, and asked,

"...Am I your target?"

"We cannot answer."

"What happened to my chauffeur?"

"If you cooperate neither of you will be harmed."

The voice was muffled through the mask. Shiki narrowed his eyes, and looked not at the men but around the car.

The ruffians beside him did not seem to be carrying guns. Even if they were, the fact that they did not have them out showed they were confident in their ability to contain him.

However – through the window Shiki could see that there were more than ten similarly masked people on standby.

With this revelation he sighed.

—What a pain. Akabayashi or Aozaki could handle these numbers.

—But fighting isn't my strong suite... How troublesome.

"If you cooperate we won't kill you. Rest assured."

—...

—These guys...?

Shiki, detecting a nuance in the voice, replied coldly,

"Very well. I will hear what you have to say."

Afterwards he was made to board a van parked nearby, and was transported, blindfolded, for about an hour.

From what he could tell of the van's motion, they had gone onto an expressway at some point, and had not made extra turns so as to confuse him.

With this and the travel duration in mind, they were probably in the west side of Tokyo outside the twenty-third district; at the villas between Tokyo and Hachiōji.

—But it's not good to assume either.

As he thought this, Shiki spoke up to the group of men in the basement.

"So? What do you want with me?"

"Nothing, apparently."

"What?"

"To be precise, it seems we're supposed to keep you here for a while. That's all."

—So these are **small fry**.

—Just pawns with no idea of the full game.

—No, if my guess is right, they're **not even pawns**...

Just as he was thinking this, there was a scuffle at the doorway.

The door opened, and new men entered the room.

From the gap he was able to see stairs leading upstairs, so it seemed this was, indeed, a basement.

Next Shiki looked at the newcomers.

Of the three men who had just entered, two were masked like the others.

The remaining one was a boy with garishly green hair, his limbs bound in the same way as Shiki.

"Stay here and behave yourself."

"I hope I get to room with pretty girls..."

Ignoring him, the men shoved him roughly.

The boy, sprawling at Shiki's feet, began to yell in a voice loud enough to echo in the room.

"They must be here, in this building! Tatsugami Aya-san and Ai-chan!"

One of the men kicked the boy in the stomach.

"Shut up."

"Ah owowow!" Okay! Okay! I'll shut up, so stop that!"

After glaring coldly at the boy, the men left without taking off his blindfold.

There was a lookout who stayed behind at the door, but he appeared disinclined to talk, simply leaning against the wall silently.

Shiki, gauging that it should be safe for himself to talk instead, spoke to the boy at his feet.

"Are you all right, boy?"

"Ah, excuse me. Could you take off my blindfold?"

"Sorry, I'm not one of them. I can see, but I'm tied up like you."

"I see. Thank you anyway."

Shiki looked the boy over appraisingly, before asking quietly,

"You're the one who was on the news this morning, right?"

"Eh? You know too, old man?"

"I don't often visit that site, but I look up the Headless Rider now and then."

"Aw shucks, can't believe I'm so famous now."

The boy smiled awkwardly. Shiki continued, coolly,

"Yeah, but I know you were lying, too."

"Huh?"

"The Headless Rider doesn't eat, much less have a favourite food. And they can't karaoke, right? Since they have no

head.”

“Oho, you believe the Headless Rider’s really a headless monster, old man?”

The boy jeered at him in a forced manner, to which Shiki simply stated,

“Whether I believe or not, it remains fact. You should know best having met Celty yourself, shouldn’t you?”

“...Hey, old man. The way you talk, the fact that you know the Headless Rider’s name... it can’t be you’re yakuza?”

The boy said jokingly. Shiki’s subordinate, lying on the floor nearby, began to reprimand him.

“Oi, are you being cheeky to Aniki? Huh?”

Shiki sighed at how his subordinate was trying to threaten the boy when he himself was tied up, and was about to ask the boy a question, but –

“Manager. I know this boy. The guys at the office were making a fuss about it the other day.”

That very subordinate recalled this at the sight of the boy’s hair, and said, anxiously, “This guy was with the boy who fought Heiwajima Shizuo.”



Afternoon. Ikebukuro West Gate Park.

Besides the outdoor stage in West Gate Park.

The eccentric combination of a man in a bartender suit and a woman in a pitch black rider suit was sitting on the metallic tube-shaped bench.

‘So this Yahiro-kun really fought with you, Shizuo?’

Reading off Celty’s smartphone screen, the man in the bartender suit – Heiwajima Shizuo – answered honestly,

“He was with a green-haired kid, right? Then it’s probably the same guy.”

Reminiscing on what had happened a few days back, Shizuo looked up at the sky, and continued.

“So you’re friends. The world sure is small.”

‘No, I just met him yesterday myself... A lot of things happened, it’s a mess.’

Celty, having heard of Shiki’s disappearance, had been looking for information around the city.

Halfway through Akabayashi had told her to be careful since she was under suspicion herself, but just then Shizuo, who had been on his break, had seen her and called out to her.

Celty, remembering the conversation between Yahiro and Li-pei from the day before, had brought it up doubtfully, only to be shocked when Shizuo confirmed it was true.

‘Unbelievable. Simon is one thing, but a normal high schooler who can face off with you...’

“What do you think I am?”

‘Sorry. It’s just that I’ve never seen you have trouble fighting anyone head-on.’

It brought to Celty’s mind a certain informant he had fought with, though not quite head-on; but she did not mention him seeing as Shizuo seemed irritated.

Yet it was Shizuo who brought him up, oddly enough:

“Do you remember Izaya?”

‘How could I forget? ...It’s strange for you to mention him.’



"I don't want to remember that pest either... But, mm, this is awkward, but since you know him, could you keep an eye on that Mizuchi Yahiro guy?"

'?'

Celty had tilted her helmet, to which Shizuo, with an awkward expression, continued,

"The guy with the green hair... He's the same type of person as that bastard Izaya."

'Really?'

"It's just a gut feeling."

'I see.'

—It's true he was so boisterous it felt unnatural.

Remembering how he had taken photos with her, Celty laughed bitterly in her heart.

She had found out the photo had hit the headlines this morning.

The suzu castella and karaoke was a stretch, but because he had described her as an un-kidnapper-like person, she was more relieved than angry.

'But why are you worried about Yahiro-kun in particular? If he's really like Izaya, everyone around him will be getting into trouble.'

To Celty, who had typed this obvious question, Shizuo, with some thought, answered,

"I don't know how to say it exactly, but when I fought with him, I remembered my old self."

'Your old self?'

"If he's that strong, he's going to end up in a lot of trouble. Especially since I've never seen him around before; he might not be a local."

Shizuo fell deeper in thought, and, clicking his tongue, spoke up again.

"Hey, Celty."

'Yeah?'

"Hypothetically, if we got along... If I could get along with Izaya about as well as Shinra, what do you think would have happened?"

'That's an amazing question.'

Celty did not hide her surprise, and probing Shizuo's intention, asked,

'Why are you asking?'

"Nothing... It's just, that building we ruined one and a half years ago was completed in the past few months..."

'Oh, that building.'

One and a half years ago.

In a series of events, Shizuo had wound up in a death match against his nemesis Orihara Izaya.

Izaya's survival was unclear since he had vanished from the city, but scars of their incredible fight had been etched onto the city itself.

There had even been a giant explosion in a building under construction, but the crime could not be pinned since Izaya, the one responsible, had disappeared.

The police could have realised Shizuo was related to it, but seeing as he had yet to be remanded for questioning, one could imagine they had let it go, or there was some special arrangement within the department.

The building's construction had been delayed due to the explosion, and Celty remembered the completion date was during her and Shinra's vacation.

"I was recalling what happened there... And I don't want to even imagine it, but I was thinking, if I got along with that flea, maybe it could have saved this city loads of trouble..."

—That's not...

true, Celty typed, but her fingers stopped.

Because she realised that indeed, had Shizuo and Izaya been on speaking terms, the victims who had been embroiled in their fights would have had much more peace in their lives.

Of course, this was including Celty herself.

'Well, that might be true, but it might have been disastrous, too.'

"Really?"

'Yeah. There's no way Izaya would have ever become a good guy. If you got along with him he could have used you to start terrible things.'

"Yeah... That's true."

Shizuo sighed lightly, and said to his friend, the Headless Rider,

"That Yahiro guy, in the middle of our fight... How to put it? He... He seemed happy. He's probably only been forced into fights he hated all this time."

'Forced to fight?'

"Yeah. When I went all out for the first time in my life, against those people controlled by that sword... I had fun, too. Just a little."

As if embarrassed that he was saying this, Shizuo switched the conversation to the future instead.

"Maybe he felt the same thing as me back then... If you're such a strong fighter, it's going to attract all kinds of people. If the flea was still here, he would have approached him."

'I know.'

"That's why, also because he's a junior from the same school... I don't want him to go down the same path as the flea and me. And I won't let off anyone like the flea who tries to use him... I mean, some things can't be helped, so I can't interfere too much. But if anything happens, could you tell him not to become like me, Celty?"

'Why don't you say it yourself?'

At Celty's words, Shizuo creased his brow, and said,

"You or Shinra or Tom-san would be one thing, but if I go and talk to a simple high schooler I might cause him trouble."

—Wait... Isn't it the same if I make friends with Yahiro-kun...? And does that mean you think it's all right to get me into trouble?

She was tempted to say this, but thinking that he would probably look out for the boys in his own way, she did not retort.

—But for Shizuo to say something like this — he's really grown soft.

—Well, Izaya's vanished to goodness knows where, so there's no reason for him to be riled up all the time anymore, I guess.

Celty, gradually accepting this change in her friend, stood from the bench.

'Sorry for taking up your break. I should be going now.'

"Are you okay? It looks like you're having a hard time. If there's anything I can help with tell me, okay?"

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

It would be bad to involve Shizuo, who had finally toned down.

With this concern about her friend's future in mind, she was about to return to chasing Shiki's trail, but –

"Headless Rider-san!"

A voice stopped her.

When Shizuo and Cely turned to look, there stood a girl.

Perhaps she had run to them, for she was out of breath; and after calming down, smiling at Cely, she said with genuine happiness,

"I... I've finally found you!"

—Huh?

—This girl is...

Before she could remember the name of the familiar girl, Shizuo voiced it.

"Yo, Akane-chan."

—Right, that's her.

—Akane-chan.

Awakusu Akane.

She was the granddaughter of the Awakusu-kai's president Awakusu Dogen, whose very name could silence crying babies; and she had a history with Cely and Shizuo.

"Hello, S, Shizuo-san."

Akane bowed her head to Shizuo hurriedly, and again turned to Cely.

"Thank goodness... You came back!"

'Yeah, I was on vacation for a while...'

"Vacation?"

'Yeah, I went to see the fireworks festival in Akita, the Kerama Islands in Okinawa, that kind of thing. It took about half a year to cover north to south.'

She had not interacted much with Akane since that one incident, so why was Akane so heartened by her return?

The question did bug Cely, but she decided to answer first without too much thought.

In response, Akane's expression became one of utter relief, and with tearful eyes she looked to Cely, saying,

"Thank goodness... You weren't the culprit after all."

'Oh, that?'

"Yes... To be honest, one of my seniors went missing, too... She was a big fan of yours!"

—Come again?

Cely stiffened internally, while Shizuo, frowning, voiced the same sentiment under his breath.

"A fan of... Cely?"

After hearing out the situation, Cely was able to make sense of several things.

—I see.

—Yesterday Yahiro-kun said the senior of a middle-schooler he knew disappeared too... But I didn't imagine that acquaintance could be Akane-chan.

The connection was unexpected, but Cely simply pondered if this was fate, or if perhaps the world was simply

smaller than she had thought, and was suitably impressed.

And remembering that that was not the time for that, she patted her own chest, and reassured Akane.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to find both your senior and Shiki-san.’

But that very moment, doubt clouded Akane’s face.

“Huh?”

‘Huh?’

“What did you mean by... Shiki-san?”

—Crap!

Apparently Akane had not yet known of Shiki’s disappearance.

Shizuo, despite not knowing the circumstances, seemed to have understood that she had made a terrible mistake, and was piercing her chest with a deadpan gaze that seemed to say, ‘What on earth are you doing?’.

‘S, sorry. I typed wrong just now. I was going to say, I’ll do my best to find your senior *with* Shiki-san.’

“You’re... lying, right?”

From Celty’s awkward phrasing it looked like Akane had seen through it completely.

‘...Sorry. I thought you would have known.’

After that, Celty soothed Akane who had proposed searching for the kidnapper herself, and learnt what information Akane had had.

What disturbed her most was the following.

“Tatsugami-sempai... spoke of you like you were a god.”

‘A god...’

‘I’m not exaggerating... She would say that you changed her world... Or, if she would give her life if she could become like the Headless Rider...’

‘...That’s scary.’

—Speaking of which, there was a girl who did plastic surgery to have the same face as me, wasn’t there?

Recalling the girl who was now in America, Celty continued to think.

—Shiki-san did mention people looking for me had vanished, but...

—Having fans is funny, and it’s one thing, but being treated like a god just makes me feel bad.

—I’m not even that important...

‘Anyway, leave it to Akabayashi-san and me, and don’t do anything dangerous, Akane-chan.’

Worried that Akane would in the worse case be endangered because of her, and doubly so because that would involve the Awakusu-kai, Celty firmly discouraged her from going after the culprit by herself.

“But that was what Shiki-san said, too...”

‘I said it’s going to be okay! Believe in me, all right? I was gone for half a year, but I’m back now, aren’t I?’

Celty insisted without rhyme or reason, but at least managed to convey her sincerity, and so Akane nodded reluctantly.

‘Don’t worry and just give me some time. I’ll definitely bring both your schoolmate and Shiki-san back.’

Celty typed this in a large font. Shizuo asked her,

“Hey, I’ll help too. Is there anything I can do?”

‘If it gets troublesome enough even I can’t handle it that’s where you come in. Other than that... It would be good if

you could ask Tom-san if he has any clue.'

"Right, call anytime. I'll come even if I have to skip work."

Seeing Shizuo smile as he said this, Cely left with a sense of encouragement.

—Well, if I have to call Shizuo I'd have to be up against an organisation of vampires or something on that level...\*

(\*Reference to Vamp!, another underrated series by Narita.)

If Shizuo were to go all out from the start most criminals would be flattened in a second. But in this case there were kidnapped hostages. If Shizuo rampaged it would be dangerous for those victims, whose safety had to be prioritised. With that in mind, Cely got onto the black motorcycle she had parked at the park's entrance.

Praying that the kidnapped victims were still alive to be used as hostages in the first place.

And – in the next moment.

Feeling a sense of foreboding from behind, she turned.

Akane and Shizuo were waving at her, so she turned back, and looked around the park.

—What's going on...

—I feel watched.

—It doesn't feel like the usual curious looks...

At that point Cely arrived at the possibility of it being the White Motorbike, and left with a shiver down her spine.

The one watching the Headless Rider continued watching until it left, and then, quietly, said,

"Heiwajima Shizuo is fine, but that girl is not."

The 'woman' inside the vehicle parked beside West Gate Park turned her narrowed gaze to Shizuo and Akane, and continued,

"That girl will disappear too."

And in a voice filled with a yearning close to adoration:

"She got too deeply involved; **that person** will take her away."

With hatred and pity for Awakusu Akane dwelling in her eyes.

A smile spread on her face, soulless, like that of a poorly-made doll.

That is her fate."

♂♀

Evening. Shinra's apartment. Underground parking lot.

"Yo, it's only been a day."

After going around the city looking for information, Cely Sturluson had returned to the underground car park.

Upon alighting from her motorcycle she was greeted by the young man she had met just the night before.

—...?!

—...Ah, Ei Li-pei.

Celty was sighing in relief having realised it was the acquaintance she had exchanged contacts with just the day before, but abruptly something hit her and, panicking, she showed him her smartphone.

‘How did you know to come here?! I gave you my email, not my address!’

‘Oh, that’s... a trade secret. I’m not going to leak it to the police or reporters. You don’t have to worry.’

Li-pei smiled guilelessly. After some thought, it hit Celty:

‘Right... Dragon Zombie teamed up with Izaya at some point. Did you hear from Izaya back then?’

‘Well, I’ve never met the informant Orihara Izaya personally. It seems my friends got on well with him while I was hospitalised. Anyway, I can’t thank him if I wanted to now no one knows if he’s even alive, right?’

‘I guess. Anyway, this just proves he’s a load of trouble dead or alive.’

Celty shrugged and replied, to which Li-pei gave a shrug of his own and smiled.

‘Heroes and villains are subjective. In the past six months you’ve been gone and no one knew if you were alive, you were made a villain yourself, weren’t you?’

‘Surely you didn’t come here to be snarky with me?’

‘Yeah, to the point. Something happened with the Awakusu-kai, right?’

‘What are you saying all of a sudden?’

Celty returned the question, wary that he might be fishing for information.

‘Jyan Jyaka Jyan have been making a riot since this morning. It looks like we’re under suspicion too.’

Jyan Jyaka Jyan was the rival gang to Dragon Zombie, and survived under the wing of the Awakusu-kai.

To be so audacious as to abduct an officer of an organisation like the Awakusu-kai, the perpetrator had to be an organisation with substantial power of its own; this was likely their reasoning.

But it was hard to imagine Dragon Zombie to go over the heads of their rival gang and attack their handler, the Awakusu-kai, directly. For this reason Celty had eliminated Li-pei from the suspect list.

‘Being suspect is inconvenient for us, too. I was thinking, since we’re helping already, we should go all out.’

‘Are you going to tell me there’s a new colour gang around or something?’

If the culprit was a gang, kidnapping Shiki with the knowledge that he was an Awakusu officer would mean they were confident in their ability to take on the Awakusu-kai.

Thinking it was possible some other group was behind it, Celty asked this.

But Li-pei shook his head.

‘The reverse, actually. Do you know of any person... any organisation that’s disappeared without a trace?’

After some thought, Celty, surprised, typed,

‘...You can’t be saying Orihara Izaya is orchestrating this from the shadows?’

‘Nonono, I don’t mean that. Just, it’s not completely impossible. At least, since he was involved. With both organisations.’

‘...”Both”?’

‘Ah, yeah. There are two. You might have heard of them, I suppose?’

After skirting around the point this far, Li-pei leant against the pillar and finally revealed the names.

‘...the illegal betting ring Amphisbaena, and the drug cartel Heaven Slave?’

‘Ah... Those people...’

Celty remembered those names.

In the past, the organisations had been crushed by the informant Orihara Izaya.

She only learnt of the details later, but she remembered being a runner for him while he was going about crushing both organisations simultaneously.

'They didn't disappear. They were disbanded.'

"But the roots are still around."

'Is that so?'

"Yeah. The central character of each organisation survived. Orihara Izaya had them in the palm of his hand, but Izaya is gone now, isn't he?"

His voice was nonchalant, but there was a tinge of danger in it.

Celty deduced the organisations had made rivals of Dragon Zombie, and continued,

'So did they disappear recently? Maybe the Awakusu-kai decided to disband them more permanently?'

"If so there would at least be some rumours. It's hard to imagine they just vanished like smoke. ...It would seem they've gone even deeper underground."

'Are they really involved in this?'

It was certainly eerie, but she could hardly assume they were the ones behind the abductions.

For that matter, while she had worked for Izaya as he was dismantling the groups, Celty had no memory of them having a grudge against her in particular.

—No, now Izaya's gone it wouldn't be strange for them to hate me thinking I was his ally.

—But that's a weak basis to say they're the kidnappers.

'Do you have anything more concrete?'

"You're sharp. I can't hide anything from you."

Li-pei said this carelessly and shrugged, and, smile fading, he continued with a serious expression,

"About half a year ago, our gang was contacted. Someone was willing to fork out any sum to get us to work for them. It was shady and I didn't want to rile up the Awakusu-kai unnecessarily, so I rejected, but... Back then that person said something."

He paused, and looking at Celty's face, said,

"...He said, 'How much do you believe in the Headless Rider?'"

'? What does that mean?'

"Exactly that. What he was asking... was if we believed that you really are a supernatural being beyond human sensibilities. He was strangely stubborn about it. I might even say he was excited."

'Who is this "he"?'

Celty pressed for an answer, and in reply, Li-pei brought up a certain name.

"His name was Shijima, written with the kanji 'four-hundred thousand'... do you know him?"

'...I've never heard of him.'

After typing that, she started as it came to her, and she hurriedly corrected herself.

'No, wait. Shijima... I know that guy.'

Celty was remembering the young man who had been with the man called Nasujima back during her 'Observation' of the city one and a half years ago.

All the young man had done was cower, but because his name was unique she still remembered him.

"He disappeared from the city shortly after we rejected him. Apparently he went around asking about you before that, too."

Li-pei smiled again, and said, cheerfully,

"Someone started a rumour about it, you know. 'Maybe the Headless Rider vanished him.'"

'...You can't be saying...'

"Exactly; he's the first missing persons case that had rumours about you being the culprit. Those rumours were just amongst ourselves, though. At any rate, a while after that people looking for the Headless Rider began to disappear. At first it was one person. The first month two people disappeared. By the third month five, and in half a year fifteen... That kind of pace."

'I see... It's worth looking into.'

Celty replied, feeling that the lead had promise, and expressed her gratitude to this unexpected visitor:

'Thanks. This could be a breakthrough. I'll tell everyone about it, too.'

"By everyone, do you mean Mizuchi Yahiro-kun?"

'Yeah... Well, I did promise to pass on any information.'

"It might be better not to involve him, perhaps."

Li-pei's voice was uncharacteristically hesitant. Celty continued, typing,

'That is – I agree it's not ideal to involve children, but I think it might assure them to know we have a lead. If we don't say any names, they probably won't act rashly, right?'

"I see~. Well, I don't mean that; I'm saying that if you get him involved at this stage, he might get attached to you, I think."

'Attached...'

"We Dragon Zombie have our eyes on him too. Since we don't just accept second-gen Taiwanese, but Japanese people too now."

The feminine young man smiled easily, and unable to tell how serious he was, Celty, remembering Shizuo's words, asked,

'So gangs are eying him after all?'

"That's for sure. He's the other hot topic around Ikebukuro these few days, besides you coming back. I'd say not many gangs know his name yet, though."

'I can see that he's strong, but... What's your own opinion on him?'

To Celty's question, Li-pei smiled cheerfully, and averting his eyes, answered.

"Monster in the flesh. I haven't met anything that could give me such a chill in a long time."

'Monster, huh.'

Celty rolled her shoulders, her tone cynical.

Aware of what she meant, Li-pei continued.

"Your body may be that of a monster. But your heart is more human than any human. That's why we can be having such a friendly talk right now. But that child could well be more inhuman than you, you know?"

Perhaps he was reliving the fight from last night; Li-pei broke out in sweat as he forced a smile.

"Fear translating into aggression is a normal reaction, but even so... For him, he has no hesitation to speak of at all. The emotion of fear switches to anger or killing intent and takes over his body. It happens in comics all the time, right? The instant his life is threatened, your strength awakens and you crush all your enemies... that kind of thing."

'I suppose I understand.'

"It's possible that in his case, just a drop of fear is enough for his brain to take off that limiter."



Then Li-pei, jokingly, said something somewhat threatening:

“Even I wouldn’t think of teaming up if I hadn’t known of you or Heiwajima Shizuo beforehand. I might even have thought... to eliminate him ASAP, you know?”

‘Don’t say that so casually.’

“Sorry, sorry. Well, he might actually have been reassured meeting you and Shizuo, you know? Did you notice? Last night, he might have been on his guard against you, but he seemed pretty happy, did you realise?”

“He must have had a difficult time living somewhere without you or Shizuo before.”



Somewhere in Ikebukuro. In front of Himeka’s home.

When Himeka tried to open the door to her home, she discovered it could not be opened.

One could say it was normal for the door to be locked, but Himeka did not have a key.

To be accurate, Himeka was not allowed to have a key.

The lights were turned on inside, but when she pressed the doorbell there was no answer.

—It’s happening again.

—It’s getting more frequent as of late.

She thought, expression unchanged.

Her mother was probably in ‘that state’.

It was a condition of her mother’s that had persisted since Himeka was a young child.

Himeka did not know if it was an illness of the mind, an act, or some kind of ritual.

Without any warning, her mother would completely shut down, and she would lean her forehead against the wall and start talking.

As if her world was locked in the shadow of herself on the wall – all of her words would be directed at her own shadow, whether they were to herself, to Himeka’s sisters or father, even to anyone nearby.

In that time, she would not react to anything Himeka said.

Even if she reacted, her answer would still be to her own shadow.

Himeka had before wondered what kind of happy dream she saw in that shadow, but her one-sided ‘conversations’ revealed nothing that seemed remotely happy.

Even with the image of her mother, talking with her head grinding against the wall, Himeka opened her bag without any change in expression.

It would be the second time today she used these tools; specialised metal instruments modified from hairpins.

They were similar to a locksmith’s lock picks, but very different from the actual thing.

She did not have the license to possess the actual thing, for one.

It was not legal for regular people to possess the specialised tools required for lockpicking.

A qualified locksmith selling them to someone would itself constitute a crime.

Because she was definitely not of an age to be a qualified locksmith, one could say she was breaking the law –

Except: other than actual locksmiths, there was an exception for 'reasonable causes'.

Himeka did not know if being regularly locked out of her own home was a reasonable cause, but it did not matter.

Today, for the first time, she broke into another person's house.

It was the second time she had used her tools and skills outside of her own door.

The first time was in middle school, to help a bullied classmate who had been locked in a storage room in the school – at that time, Himeka had thought that it being a crime was unimportant.

Today she had picked the lock thinking there might have been a criminal inside, and because she was worried about Kuon, but that was likely no excuse.

Having lied to Kuon's sister Nozomi without a beat, was she any different from a thief?

Himeka thought that she was no different.

No; the fact that she had felt no guilt at all could mean she was of worse character than even a thief.

As she thought this, while inserting the tools into the keyhole, she remembered what had happened that evening.

It was on the way home from their talk with Kuon's sister.

She had assumed Yahiro would distance himself from her and harbour dislike for her after seeing her pick the lock. She did not mind as she would have deserved that; and thought it could not be helped if he suspected her of being someone who stole things often, or started rumours about her.

However, instead of avoiding her, he started talking to her while they were in the lift.

"I was so shocked when you just unlocked the door like that. Where did you learn how to do that?"

"A senior three years up who lived nearby taught me when I was in elementary school."

Himeka was slightly surprised by the question, but thinking it was nothing to hide, answered promptly.

"I don't know why she knew how to do that, but she saw I was often locked out of the house, so she taught me how to let myself in."

"Locked out?"

"Family situation. My sisters and I don't have our own keys, and the door isn't always open."

"I see, that must be tough."

Yahiro had said he lived in a hot spring inn operating all year round, so people were always going in and out, and there was always bound to be someone inside, so he was never very conscious of locks. It was possible that he had accepted Himeka's bizarre family situation thinking it was a normal thing in Tokyo.

Even so Himeka let it pass. After that, Yahiro thanked her:

"Thanks for today."

"Eh?"

"If not for you, I wouldn't have been able to meet Kuon's sister."

"..."

Himeka thought to let that pass too, but with a slight sigh, she informed Yahiro,

"You're weird after all, Mizuchi-kun."

"I am?"

"Normally wouldn't you think I was a thief, seeing me do something like that?"

To this Yahiro answered promptly,

"Ah, yeah, I was shocked earlier because I thought we were like thieves."

Yahiro answered confidently, as if asserting that he was normal.

"Then don't you look down on me?"

"Are you a thief?"

"I'm not."

"Then there's no reason for me to dislike you."

It was the kind of conversation that would have had Kuon complaining by now about how casual they both were if he were here. Yahiro, reminiscing on his past, continued,

"Right, the one time I met a thief he broke the lock with a hammer instead. When I saw and called out to him, he tried to hit me with it. That was way more shocking than just now."

"Should I have laughed..."

She had not been able to tell if it was a joke or the truth; only that he had been desperately trying to lighten the mood. Himeka, feeling bad for remaining expressionless despite his effort, checked that she had unlocked the door.

"I'm home..."

When she opened the door there was a silhouette, and thinking it must be her mother, she called out automatically.

But –

"...? ...!"

She realised the person on the other side was not her mother.

Then she sensed multiple people behind her, from outside the door –

She was pushed down from behind before she could even cry out.



"O... Oi oi oi oi! What, just what's going on here!"

On the premises of another house.

The group of people who had snuck onto the lawn and was watching Himeka broke out in noise seeing what had just happened.

Suddenly a group of men had barged into Himeka's doorway, pushed her down, and bundled her onto a van that had stopped by the entrance.

"Wh, what do we do, Horada-san?"

"What on earth... Huh~? What the hell?!"

Still unable to absorb the situation, Horada was completely confused.

In order to make the high schooler who had faced off with Shizuo an ally of their own, Horada had gotten his underlings to do their own research on the boy.

The boy's name was Mizuchi Yahiro, and he was born in Akita. In addition, he had been with the green-haired boy Kotonami Kuon since the first day of school, and got along with a student by the name of Tatsugami Himeka. With this knowledge, Horada's strategy had been to go after the girl, and so they had been following her.

“Could it be someone had the same plan and got the girl first?”

It was true that Horada, being a thug, had had the thought of using the girlfriend as a hostage to make Yahiro obey him flash through his mind.

But considering it would have to be a long-term relationship, he had decided instead of something so one-off it would be more appropriate to have Yahiro owe them for something and draw him into their gang with that.

After tailing Himeka they had finally acquired her address, and he had just been about to discuss their future plans, only for this sudden turn of events.

“Should we help her, then?”

“N, no, they look pretty tough...”

“Didn’t you say you kidnapped the girlfriend of the Yellow Scarves’ leader before?”

“Kidnapping and helping out is completely different!”

With this embarrassing retort, Horada wracked his confused brain for ideas.

“Damn it, what now? If they’re the Awakusu-kai or something we can’t possibly interfere...”

“What about pretending we just passed by and calling the police?”

“The police, huh... I don’t want to bring them in...”

Just the memory of the face of the traffic officer who had arrested him previously and the blood drained from his face.

“Ahhhhh, shit, think, think! Go, me!”

Then, gritting his teeth, he decided to stall for time first.

“You, follow on your motorcycle.”

Remembering that one of his underlings who he had gotten to tail Himeka had come on a motorcycle, he turned to the alley where it was parked.

“Huh?! I, I’ve never tailed a vehicle before!”

“If you can tail a person you can tail a van just fine! Hurry up!”

“O, okay!”

As he watched his junior scramble onto the motorcycle, Horada continued his earlier train of thought.

—Yeah. If the ones at the end of the trail look weak we’ll beat them up and have him owe me a favour.

—If they’re the Awakusu-kai or something... Well, we can just pretend we saw nothing.

This he decided. Just then, he saw a silhouette exit Himeka’s house.

“Huh?”

At the sight of this person giving directions to the men on the way to the van, Horada could not help but frown.

“A woman...?”

# Interlude: Rumours on the Internet ⑤

*Ikebukuro Information Site, IkeNEW! Version IKEBUKURO*

Latest Article, *Tragic News: Green Boy who Befriended Headless Rider Missing!*

Content from microblogging site Twittia:

I haven't been able to contact ●●●● since the IkeNEW article featured him this morning.

- Seriously?
  - Looks like he's MIA. No one answered when we called his house either.
    - He's missing?
      - Because he knew the Headless Rider's secrets?

*IkeNEW!* Administrator's Comment

"He went missing-nari.

Apparently the users who tweeted this are Blue Square members-nari.

So the green-hair was a blue guy after all-nari?

[This boy so boldly asked for all this personal information and even took a picture, but he wasn't kidnapped-nari.

If the boy doesn't go missing after this, that would mean the rumour about the Headless Rider being a kidnapper is fake after all-nari.]

↑ I said this in the last article, but it's not yet confirmed that he's missing-nari.

Comments will be locked-nari.

There are commenters in our previous article saying he's missing because we put up that article, but that's not true-nari.

If you have the time to blame others, you should pray for the boy's safety like a proper Ikebukuroan."

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Excerpts of typical tweets from microblogging site *Twittia*.

Argh. I want to punch the IkeNEW admin in the face.

Someone going missing and it's 'Tragic News'? Stop screwing around, Mister Lila.

- It's useless to scold that site's admin. The controversy only adds on to the viewership.
  - There's no point complaining, even if people die that jerk still tags on that nari-nari everywhere.
    - He even puts illegal manga scans as headers, right?

- Maybe if IkeNEW gets reported it'll go down once and for all...

So the Headless Rider kidnapped him after all?

- Why would they do that?
  - Because he exposed that they liked suzu castella...?
    - What's wrong with that? It's tasty.
- But what if the Headless Rider really was the one who did it?
  - Then IkeNEW will have been complicit, since it spread the lie that the Headless Rider was safe.
    - So it was a lie that it was a lie.
      - IkeNEW hasn't apologised yet?
        - Don't go there to comment, it'll only up the view count.

Speaking of which, I saw the Headless Rider hanging around this afternoon.

- In Ikebukuro?
  - In West Gate Park, talking to Heiwajima Shizuo.
    - Ah, then that's the real thing for sure.
- I saw too. They were with a middle school girl, right?
  - What's the likelihood of the girl becoming an urban legend too...

The Dragon Zombie fellows have been noisy recently.

- The sickly leader is back now after being hospitalised, apparently.
  - Sickly...
    - No, it's true he had a weak constitution, but I heard he recovered after surgery.
- That Horada guy is back too, right?
  - Who's Horada?
  - Horada got in trouble with Shizuo recently.
    - Heyhey, who's Horada?
      - The guy who always tagged along with Izumii-san, remember.
        - Oh, Higa-san's senior! I remember!
          - Who the fuck are you guys? I'll find your names and beat you up just you wait.
            - Who's this? You're being scary so I've blocked you.

There've been a lot of cars going in and out of a mountainside villa near my house.

- It's spring, so maybe they're tourists here to see the flowers?
  - Possibly. There are some scary-looking people, but maybe they came with their families. There are lot of kids that look school-age.
    - Hasn't the school term started?
      - Oh? You're right...



# Chapter 7A

## The Successor (Part 1)

Night time. Yahiro's apartment.

When Mizuchi Yahiro reached home, the landlady's younger brother Togusa Saburo was, as always, tending to his van.

"Yo, you're pretty late."

"Sorry."

"There's no need to apologise. It's not like we set a curfew for you."

Togusa smiled, to which Yahiro bowed his head again.

Then, somewhat hesitantly, he asked,

"Saburo-san, do you know about the Headless Rider?"

"Eh? Yeah, well, kinda."

"What kind of person are they?"

"What kind of person... Uh, I'm not sure if you can say the Headless Rider is human, but anyway."

Hesitating, Saburo chose his words carefully as he answered,

"Well, the Headless Rider's a do-gooder, I'd say."

"A do-gooder?"

"They drive without a license or headlights or a number plate like a combination of every traffic violation ever, but as a person they're twice as kind as most people. If there's someone in trouble and they see it, they'll help without a second thought."

As he polished his van, Saburo continued, somewhat irately,

"I'm a driver too, so I used to think of the Headless Rider as just a troublemaker, but... Well, I still think they cause lots of trouble, but now I know their situation, so..."

"Situation?"

"Ah... No, well, some things happened."

Togusa continued hurriedly, as if to cover up what he had just said.

"Well, there a lot of people in this city who fear the Headless Rider, and a lot of thugs they've beaten up. But there are just as many people who were helped by the Headless Rider and are grateful for it."

"Grateful..."

"You'll understand if you meet in person."

Saburo asserted, to which Yahiro said, promptly,

"Ah, um, I met them yesterday."

"You met!"

"I got their email, too."

"So fast?!"

As he scrubbed the van off with a rag, Saburo looked at Yahiro in surprise.



"Wait, what kind of high school life are you having...? Getting beaten up by Shizuo, making friends with Celty..."

"Ah, you know their name."

"Yeah, well. If you mention Togusa Saburo they'll probably remember me too."

Togusa realised something just then, and proposed to Yahiro,

"Right. If you know each other. Celty's friends with Shizuo. You can ask Celty to mediate a little."

"Ah, is that so?"

"Yeah, well, of all the people I know they're best at talking to Shizuo. If you ask sincerely, Celty won't mind being the middleman for you."

"I see... I'll try to ask. Thank you very much!"

Yahiro bowed his head politely. Togusa continued, dispensing advice as the older party.

"Anyway, the city is full of rumours, but in the end people can only judge with their own eyes. If you fail at that point even then that's all there is to it."

"Okay."

"That goes for you too, you know? You should treasure your friends. There will be people who gossip about you and see you through coloured lenses, but there are always people who will see your true face and make their own judgment."

Perhaps something in those words had struck a chord with Yahiro, for he dwelled on it for some time before bowing his head more deeply than before.

"...Thank you very much."

Yahiro, smiling slightly, asked Saburo:

"Saburo-san, you must have many great friends, huh?"

"Haha, it's just that I go around fighting a lot. I don't have many, exactly."

With an embarrassed smile, Togusa wiped the van quickly with the rag.

"Well, they're all very different. There's an old-fashioned guy who's like a reliable boss of justice, and then there's an old guy who sells tickets who's the epitome of suspiciousness... And then there's..."

His voice dropped a semitone.

He had just discovered an anime decal casually slapped onto the rear window.

◦ And, the faces of the duo responsible surfacing in his mind, he ground out darkly,

"Anyway... Treasure your friends. But make sure you choose them well from the start, got it?"



Yahiro's room.

Back in his room, on his bed, Yahiro remembered what Saburo had said earlier.

—Judge with their own eyes, huh.

From the Headless Rider's perspective, what did he, Himeka and Kuon look like?

He wondered.

Up till middle school, a lot of the people who had heard of him had attacked him.

When they saw him fight back they would fear him as a 'monster', and look at him with frightened eyes. Those who heard rumours of him and decided to bring him down would end up looking up at him in fear after being defeated themselves. But how much difference was there between what the rumours said of him and his actual self? The Headless Rider was more human than he had imagined from the rumours. Heiwajima Shizuo was far stronger than he had expected, and also more human than he had imagined. What had angered Shizuo was that the Headless Rider had been degraded and spoken of as a kidnapper, a creature on exhibit. To be that genuinely angry to hear a friend being denigrated was to Yahiro something to be admired greatly. This could not be helped, because for Yahiro friendship was something he had only seen in comics and movies.

—What about me?

—If someone mocked Kuon-kun or Tatsugami-san... Would I get that angry?

—We only met a few days ago, so that might be unreasonable.

—But does time really matter?

—If it does... I wonder, from now on, if I can be friends with those two... No, many more people, too...

—Be close friends... like Heiwajima Shizuo-san and the Headless Rider.

Yahiro had yet to see Celty and Shizuo's friendship in person, but had no reason to doubt its authenticity.

Both he had thought of as true 'monsters'. No; both were more monstrous than he had imagined, yet seemed far more human than himself.

Perhaps there was truth in the rumours surrounding them. But it was certain those rumours did not encompass all there was to them.

—Information spreads both in real life and on the internet, huh.

—Information really is scary.

Saburo's words returned Yahiro to the events earlier that evening.

To what Kotonami Nozomi had spoke of Kuon as a person.



A few hours ago. Kotonami Kuon's house.

'Do you know of Orihara Izaya?'

Nozomi, still cooped up in the room, brought up one man's name.

"...No, I don't know him."

Yahiro answered with a look at Himeka, who shook her head as well.

'I see. That can't be helped. Well, he's famous as an informant in Ikebukuro. Anyway, he's pretty amazing.'

"Huh..."

The sudden mention of an 'informant' of all things stumped him, but the name itself sounded familiar as well.

—Why does he sound familiar...

—Ah.

—Ei-san and the Headless Rider might have mentioned him in their conversation yesterday...

Nonetheless, unsure if it had really been 'Orihara Izaya' they mentioned, he chose to listen without bringing it up.

Yahiro and Himeka were puzzled as to how this informant was related to Kuon, but right then –

'I was a slave of this Orihara Izaya.'

"Okay... ..Eh?"

The words almost went in one ear and out of the other, but Yahiro started as the words sank in.

'I say I was his slave, but at the time I was completely willing, so maybe you could say "fanatic".'

"Fanatic...?"

'Kuon and I, you see... We lost our parents when we were very young~. The family who fostered us treated us really badly. We were pathetic; they wouldn't let us eat anything other than what we got at school for up to half a year, or they'd use our clothes as cleaning rags and make us wear them afterwards. They'd make both of us go without clothes, for example, and they did a lot of things to us I can't tell you here. Anyway, it's not unheard of.'

"..."

Nozomi spoke so nonchalantly of the tragedy that it put Yahiro at a loss of words.

She might not have been able to notice it across the phone, for she continued with no less energy.

'And I don't know how he found out about us, but it was Izaya-san who helped us.'

"He helped you?"

'Yes, he did. He called out to me one day, as I was going home from school.'

It seemed like a vague explanation, but right after she continued, skipping ruthlessly to the conclusion.

'Izaya-san wrecked our family for us. He made it so that the people who abused us committed suicide, or got arrested, or got abducted and disappeared.'

"..."

'It was Izaya-san who taught we who were left behind how to live. Kuon never met him directly, but I made sure to tell him every single day, just how amazing Izaya-san was, how incredible. I would say, we're alive all thanks to Izaya-san; I would do anything for Izaya-san! If it was for Izaya-san, even my life is worth giving!'

Nozomi explained almost cheerily, as if there was some comedic element in the situation, and Yahiro and Himeka could only listen, unable to react.

'Ahaha! You understand now, don't you! Kuon, who had never met Izaya-san, was so jealous, and so worried about this useless big sister of his! When I got a boyfriend he even started saying extreme things, like that he would kill Izaya-san, you know~?'

"? Boyfriend as in... Izaya-san?"

'Nonono! There's no way I could be Izaya-san's girlfriend!'

Nozomi rejected the idea outright and explained the somewhat complicated circumstances.

'Mmm, there used to be a color gang around called the Yellow Scarves. About four years ago, I approached the right-hand man of the leader of that gang, got close to him, and eventually became his girlfriend.'

And her next words made both Yahiro and Himeka frown.

'I did it because Izaya-san told me to.'

"...What?"

'This girl, Saki-chan, became the girlfriend of the boy leading the gang, and I became the girlfriend of the second-in-command. Well, Izaya-san said to do as I please, so I just dated him for a while and dumped him soon after.'

"You really dated him because this Orihara Izaya told you to?"

Himeka asked, and Nozomi answered, not even stopping to think.

'Of course~! At that time it was a given I would.'

—'Was'?

—She's using past tense.

Just as he thought this, she laughed again.

'So this went on~, and you understand how Kuon must have been, right? Kuon, who thought of someone like me as his only remaining family, who cherished me so dearly. Kuon, who'd say something so cute as, 'No matter how hard things get, I'll definitely protect Nee-chan!''

Nozomi chuckled, but her voice seemed to be shaking.

'But I didn't understand.'

"Ah..."

'I didn't understand, you know?'

Her voice dropped just slightly. Yahiro asked,

"Are things... different now?"

'...'

After a brief silence, Nozomi answered.

'It was maybe one and a half years ago. Izaya-san disappeared.'

"Disappeared?"

'Yeah. He vanished from Ikebukuro like smoke. There were rumours that he was killed by Heiwajima Shizuo, or stabbed by a Russian mercenary.'

Heiwajima Shizuo's name coming up was startling, but Yahiro decided it must have simply been one rumour of many, and did not interrupt.

'I've been a shut-in since then. It's such a joke; when Izaya-san disappeared I just didn't know what to do. I no longer knew how to talk to people, not even over the phone like this.'

It was hard to extrapolate from how confidently she was speaking now, but remembering how she had been when they were talking face-to-face, Yahiro could somewhat understand.

'I get the feeling I spent the whole time in the corner of the room just saying "Izaya-san Izaya-san Izaya-san".'

As if her memory of that time was vague, her voice had become unsure.

Then, steadying her voice just slightly, she told them:

'And that was when Kuon said. He said, "I will become Orihara Izaya."'

"Kuon-kun said...?"

'Yeah. He said, "I will become Izaya's replacement, so that Nee-chan can go on living.'"

Happily, and yet with just a hint of loneliness, Nozomi continued,

'That's why, since one and a half years back, my brother has been trying to be like Orihara Izaya. ...No. Maybe he's trying to be something even greater than Izaya-san.'

'Neither Kuon nor I know whether this is for my sake or his anymore.'



Present. Yahiro's room.

Looking up at the ceiling, Yahiro sighed softly.

"The world is full of things I don't know..."

He felt that he had known nothing about the world before

Yahiro, lying face-up, raised his right hand, and curling his fingers into a fist, he gazed at it, remembering how he had been before this year.

'This is the world.'

With this thought, with neither hope nor despair, somehow he had simply gone on living.

He had thought of himself, he, who however much he struggled could not escape being labelled a monster, as unsightly.

But today, when he learnt about the path Kuon and his sister had walked until now, he could not help but think: Were they not far more pitiful than himself?

—I only ever hurt others.

—Have I just been blaming my environment and throwing tantrums all this time, then?

—Kuon was hurt, and he endured it, but even then he never gave up.

Yahiro, now aware of the dark side to Kuon, who he had only thought of as a frivolous person before, now held true respect for him.

—I don't think what's he's doing is right, but...

—Turns out... he's an amazing person, huh.

He let his eyes rove around the room as he thought, and they alighted on the wood-framed radio beside his bed.

—And it seems like Tatsugami-san's family situation is complicated, too.

—She might have been suffering much more than me all this time.

—I was only ever scared; my family was always kind to me...

—Maybe all along I've been greedy for something that doesn't exist.

Yahiro sunk into self-loathing, and looking at the newer scars on his fist, thought:

—But even so.

The excitement, the ecstasy, the enjoyment of the world that he had experienced for the first time, these feelings

fighting Heiwajima Shizuo had left him with, were still there and trembling in his fist.

"I think it was good that I came to this city."

Murmuring this thought under his breath, he then got up, mind set.

And then, with the smartphone he was not yet used to, he searched for information online.

When he searched on the serial disappearances in Ikebukuro, the first result was the news blog site *IkeNEW!*.

The website with Kuon and Celty's photo together.

And also – the same site run by Kuon's sister.



A few hours ago. Kuon's room.

'Let's get back on track. Now Kuon and I run the website I mentioned earlier, "IkeNEW!". Thanks to that we have our own income, and we can pay the rent for this apartment.'

"?"

Yahiro was unable to draw a link between 'running a website' and 'income' in his mind.

Despite not being able to see him, Nozomi seemed to detect the mood and began to explain about the site.

'Ah, see, the site has advertisements, right? They make money.'

"Right, there were all kinds of ads..."

'There's the type that earn us money when people just click on them, and the type that only pays when people buy the product. Then there's direct contracts with firms and sponsors.'

"Oh."

Yahiro had been wondering why there were so many advertisements, but this he could make sense of. Just as he was poring over this,

'Usually it's something people do for extra cash, so about 10,000 yen in revenue per month is pretty good. But in my case, taking the recent average, it's, maybe, 2.8 million yen a month?'

"Two point...?!"

'Our site is special, though. Since I post news about Ikebukuro exclusively. ...Ah, of course, that sum includes income from other sites I run, too.'

"Y... You can earn that much money online?!"

'It's hit and miss, you know? There are people serious about it that can make multiple times my income, and cases where they go overboard and get blacklisted completely.'

Nozomi said wisely. Yahiro asked further,

“What do you mean overboard?”

Nozomi became a shade more excited.

‘Welp, affiliate blogging is a shady market in itself! There are those that do it honestly, but there are sites that toe the law without a second thought. And mixed in all that you have extortionists and imitators...’

“Extortionists?”

Yahiro blurted, having never thought of the word in an online setting, to which Nozomi elaborated,

‘Yep. At first they target companies, inviting them as sponsors, or luring them in by promising they’ll receive information before anyone else. And if the firm rejects them they publish lots of nasty news about them to pressure them, and say, “See, you’re real famous now, right?” In the end they’ll threaten not to stop until the company hands over money or information, so they get paid either way.’

“That’s awful.”

‘You’re free to write anything so long as you refrain from anything that actually counts as libel. For example, there was a time where this magazine launched a digital edition that was more expensive than the print version, right? At that time, there was a site that wrote an article complaining why it was like that when the digital edition had no printing costs involved.,

“?”

If that was the case, indeed it would be strange for the digital version to be more expensive.

As if answering Yahiro’s thoughts, Nozomi revealed the truth of the matter.

‘But the digital edition turned out to be special and had tons of bonus pages the print version didn’t have, so it had almost twice as many pages! In other words, it was completely reasonable that it was more expensive.’

“Ah...”

‘Of course, the original siteowner was aware of this, and omitted it when he wrote the article. So that even though it was actually better, the e-magazine was presented as a rip-off. After the article went around people who knew the truth would write angry comments on the site, but the viewership and comments only help to bring in cash~. Since that data alone makes it easier to hook up sponsors.’

Yahiro was shocked that such people existed, but Nozomi simply laughed and continued.

‘If they’re unlucky enough to get reported they just have to say, “Sorry, I didn’t know,” and delete the article. Well, if you get the timing wrong on that you might get into real legal trouble and that’s the end for you, though.”

“Oh... But, Nozomi-san, you don’t do any of that, right?”

‘No way, we’re even worse than them~!’

“Worse?!”

Yahiro raised an eyebrow. Nozomi nodded from the other side.

‘Yep. Because we act as a source and sell our information to other sites, too~. And you know what’s the best way to get the scoop before anyone else?’

There Himeka realised.

“You... make your own news?”

‘Exactly~!’

“That’s too much...”

As he heard Nozomi’s energetic voice – Yahiro suddenly felt uneasy.

“...?”

“...”

–Tatsugami-san is... trembling?

Thus far she seemed to be a girl who was usually calm, so why was she disturbed by the answer she herself had uttered?

Although it bothered him, Nozomi was still talking.

‘Well, we make our own news, but it’s not illegal by any means~. Mostly, that is! Like we’ll scatter mysterious slips of paper all over Ikebukuro, or fly a remote-controlled UFO model, and then video it and put it up on Twittia! The weirder it is the faster it spreads.’

Yahiro and Himeka immediately remembered the article with Kuon’s photo this morning.

“So the article about Kuon this morning was staged, too?”

Himeka asked. Nozomi nodded again from her side.

‘Yeah, it was! About thirty percent of our content are things we stage ourselves. We don’t bother with the celebrities living in Ikebukuro, though. Well, in any case, you can’t take anything we write too seriously! There’s a load of lies in there.’

“Why would you publish lies?”

Yahiro asked, frowning.

He had browsed the site during the lunch break, but the articles about Celty were troubling; just as he would think Celty was being presented as a criminal that theory would be disproved in the blink of an eye. There was nothing tangible about the siteowner’s true opinion or identity. ‘That’s because it’s our style to focus on scandals and outright lies and rile everyone up!’

“Why would you...”

‘I could say it’s the easiest way to make money, but...’

Nozomi paused, and spoke the name of ‘that man’ once more.

‘**If Izaya-san set up a news site**, surely it’d be like this.’

“?”

‘My handle name, Lila Tailtooth Zaiya... If you translate ‘tail’ and ‘tooth’ into Japanese... it becomes O-Ri-Ha-Ra-I-Za-Ya.’

“Okay...”

So what was she trying to say?

Despite having claimed to have recovered, was she still obsessed with Izaya after all?

It seemed tilting his head was becoming a habit of Yahiro’s since he had come to Ikebukuro.

But Yahiro quickly grew ashamed of these thoughts in the next few seconds.



'There are many, many girls out there like me.'

"...Like you?"

'Apparently Izaya-san **created** a lot of girls like me... There are plenty of them in despair now he's gone. There was one who tried to kill herself and wound up in hospital... But these girls, they're quick to notice our site, and that anagram.'

"Ah..."

Realising Nozomi's true intention, Yahiro grew ashamed of how dense he had been, thinking 'So what?' earlier.

'When they realise, it's comforting to them, you know? It's like, "Ah, thank goodness, Izaya-san's still around." Or, "He's still alive somewhere, on the internet." Just that alone can become a reason to live; humans truly are interesting creatures.'

Nozomi, for the sake of other girls who had been 'fanatics' like herself, was pretending to be the 'sect leader' Orihara Izaya.

Himeka, contemplating the significance of her actions, then asked about what one could say was the crux of the issue:

"But, that means... Are you... going to keep lying to those girls? From now on?"

'Mm~... We'll probably keep doing it.'

Nozomi said, somewhat sad.

'But if they could accept that we're not Izaya-san... If those girls could accept Izaya-san's disappearance, I think they wouldn't need him in the first place, you know? ...If I think of it that way, I don't feel as guilty.'

For some reason, Yahiro could picture Nozomi shrugging on the other side of the call.

'Eh, in the end we're still fraudsters.'

'But we're a site that posts scams all the time, after all! You can only blame the people who fall for it!'



Present. Yahiro's room.

"Ah."

Browsing the past articles of IkeNEW, he discovered an article on himself.

—I got featured too.

Unsurprisingly, the article was about his fight with Heiwajima Shizuo.

Apparently talk about him being perhaps able to defeat Shizuo was going around.

—They're speaking too highly of me!

—I couldn't even lay a finger on him...!

Someone had even taken a video, but due to the poor definition, his face was unclear.

Even so, Kuon must have been fully aware of who he was.

Had he kept it a secret from his sister?

—No, Nozomi-san knew me back there, so she knew after all?

—Damn. She didn't say a word about it...

Yahiro sighed, torn whether not having his name released to the public was something worth being thankful for. Despite being used as a news topic to generate revenue he was not particularly outraged.

—The video didn't expose my identity, anyway.

—In the first place, I lost, so people will just think I was a brat who didn't know better.

Not realising that being able to deal damage to Shizuo was itself extremely unusual, all he felt was that Nozomi's article had exaggerated too much.

Rather, seeing the video, he was more worried about the owner of the green hair at the corner of the video.

Was he really safe?

Nozomi's words came back to him.

*—'Kuon said... He's not absolutely sure about the culprit's objective, but if they're trying to frame the Headless Rider as a criminal, he probably won't be let free.'*

*—'He didn't expect to be kidnapped just a few hours after uploading the article, though.'*

*—'But he'll be fine. He did it with a plan in mind.'*

*—'Both Kuon and I... We're willing to gamble with our lives if it means becoming like Izaya-san.'*

*—'You probably have your own opinion about this, but we won't listen to someone who hasn't even met Izaya-san.'*

*—'We're fully aware that at the rate we're going it won't be strange to end up stabbed by someone, though.'*

At that time he had been speechless, but now Yahiro felt a little angry.

Angry at how easily they would throw away their own lives.

And then she had said to Yahiro:

*—'Don't be too depressed, Yahiro-kun. That boy only thinks of you as a pawn.'*

Yahiro thought that was unimportant.

"I'll definitely find him and talk to him directly."

With a faint smile, Yahiro tightened his fist.

And, almost as if it was timed – his phone rang.

"?"

When he picked up, it was a familiar voice that came through the receiver.

'Hey, it's me. Kuronuma Aoba.'

"Oh... Why are you calling, sempai?"

Remembering that they had exchanged numbers after school, Yahiro listened on.

'Can you leave your house right now?'

"But it's the middle of the night? Did anything happen?"

Yahiro answered in surprise. Aoba said, calmly,

'Your friend, Tatsugami-san? She's been kidnapped.'

"Huh...?"

Cold sweat broke out over his back.

Before he could ask if it was a joke, Aoba continued,

‘We might not know who did it, but we do know where she was taken.’

“?!”

‘What about it? Will you join us to save her?’

# Chapter 7B

## The Successor (Part 2)

Less than an hour ago. Somewhere in the city.

Near a deserted park some way from the heart of the city.

A place Akane would generally avoid after nightfall.

Not that she would have reason to be here in the daytime either—after all, Shiki had just been abducted, and this was a secluded alley.

She was peering around, as if waiting for someone.

“Here should be fine ...”

Akane murmured, and just then a van parked in front of her.

“?”

Next a number of men alighted from the van, and closed in around her.

“You’re Akane-chan, right?”

“...”

Sensing danger, Akane’s hand drifted towards the long, slim bag on her back.

But the men smiled, and opened the door on the side of the van.

And when Akane laid eyes on the figure inside, her eyes turned shocked.

Then, right after—**with a smile of relief, she took a step towards the van of her own volition.**

“Oi! What do you think you’re doing!”

Before Akane could open her mouth to speak, a rough, male voice yelled out.

All of them turned towards it, to see another group of men running towards them.

These men were clearly an unlawful sort, but Akane was unruffled by their appearance.

This was because she recognized them as the men who frequently accompanied Shiki.

“...!”

The men from the van leapt back into the vehicle the moment they noticed their new company.

One of them reached out to force Akane along, but—

“No!”

Sensing a dangerous vibe from him, Akane batted his arm away from her.

“Kuh...”

With that he shut the van, and they escaped the fierce-looking men by a hairbreadth.

“Stop right there!”

One of the men tried to jump onto the roof of the van, but missed and fell to the road—and so all that was left were Akane and the rugged men.

“Why are you out here so late, Miss Akane...”

“What about all of you, why are you here?”

“Ah, well, we were just passing by...”

Assuming that Akane did not know of Shiki’s disappearance, the men exchanged glances and chose to draw the

conversation elsewhere.

"More importantly, what happened, Miss Akane? Were you about to get on that suspicious van...!"

"...yes."

Averting her gaze uncomfortably, she answered with full honesty:

"Because there was someone I knew inside..."

♂♀

Shinra's apartment. Underground car park.

'So is this Shijima person behind this? Or was he the first victim...?'

"No idea. I was thinking there would be further developments once you came back..."

Li-pei's reply was nonchalant in spite of the fact that he was involved himself.

"Anyway, if they catch us chatting so happily like this I might become a target too, like that green-head."

'Huh? What do you mean?'

"What?"

'What?'

As he realised they were on different frequencies, Li-pei wore a look of surprise, and asked her,

"Ahhh... You don't know yet?"

'Know what?'

"That green-haired boy's been kidnapped."

—...

—...What?!

Celty's world froze for a moment at this unexpected news.

And, as though the timing had been calculated, her ringtone began to blare.

'Hello, is this our Courier-san? Tap twice if it's a good time for you.'

—Akabayashi-san.

The voice belonged to a man from the Awakusu-kai like Shiki. Despite her bewilderment over Kuon's situation, Celty quickly tapped on the receiver.

'It's an emergency situation, so I called instead of texting... Akane-chan just met with a kidnap attempt, actually.'

—?!

The confusion in Celty's mind only grew at the news that Akane, who she had just spoken to that afternoon, had been attacked.

'We know you spoke to her this afternoon, since we have the younger men guarding her from the shadows. I know you're not the kidnapper; plus the ones who did it was a group of men we've never encountered. None of them look like the mastermind, but then again we don't know anything about them.'

Akabayashi outlined the situation calmly, and then went to the point.

'So, Oi-chan's friends from Jyan Jyaka Jyan are tailing them right now...'

'Any mood to catch the real culprit and restore your honour?'

♂♀

Somewhere in the city.

'Horada-san, I managed to follow them without getting caught... They entered a villa around the Hachiōji forest.'

"Good job! Stay there and keep your eyes open."

The underling he had sent off as their runner had called back, and Horada replied cheerfully.

‘Erm... I have bad news, to be honest?’

“Bad how?”

Horada’s brows furrowed. The other man replied, somewhat afraidly,

‘There are a bunch of vans parked on the grounds... A lot of people are going in and out...’

“What gang are they? Th, they’re not Awakusu-kai, are they?”

Horada asked this, mentally prepared to retreat immediately if it was an organisation of that calibre.

‘No, that’s not what I mean... Something is weird. Like, the people here, they’re not a gang, and they look like regular folks no matter how I see it... And I think there are middle and high schoolers too...’

“The hell?”

‘But in terms of numbers... There are definitely more than ten people, from what I’ve seen.’

“Seriously? Shit, if it was only the four, five people on the van we could manage it somehow... Whatever, anyway, mail us a map of the place or something.”

With this Horada hung up, but right after that his phone rang again.

It was a friend from his Blue Square days, the one he had asked to investigate Mizuchi.

“Yo, what’s up?”

‘Ahh, I found that Mizuchi kid’s house, but... bad news.’

“You too?! Fuck, everyone keeps going bad news, bad news... What happened?”

Horada said irritatedly. The other man replied,

‘The apartment... Um, it’s Togusa’s house.’

“?!”

‘He was polishing his van the whole time, but they were talking, he and Mizuchi.’

Togusa.

In the past they were in the Blue Square together, but he was one of those who had betrayed their past leader Izumii, rebelling under the lead of a man called Kadota.

“Oi, don’t tell me Kadota’s got his hands on that kid already...!”

‘Uh, I don’t know for sure. You know Togusa’s apartments around there? They rent rooms out now and then, right?’

“Hrm...”

Horada groaned in frustration, and thought for a while.

—Shit, what now?

—Getting Mizuchi indebted to us is good, but it’s gonna suck if Kadota pops up.

—Is there a way to do it without dirtying my hands...

—In the first place, jumping into a fight with a bunch of unknowns seems like a bad idea, too...

With the information in his hands, Horada wracked his brains, and through that—

He arrived at a certain solution.

—Right.

—This is what Blue Square is for, isn’t it?

—I can just let them go in there, and if anything bad happens pretend I didn’t know anything.

—In the best case, Mizuchi joins the Blue Square, and I can walk into their base and say, ‘I was the one who found your girlfriend’.

—...It's not a lie, so the current Blue Square people can't argue either, right?

Thinking only of his own benefit, Horada began to press the buttons on his cell.

—And then I just pray Izumii-san doesn't show up.

With a shiver down his spine, Horada greeted the boy he was calling with such vigour it was unnatural.

"Yo! Kuronuma Aoba-kun, right? It's me! Me! Your friendly sempai Horada! I just thought I'd pass this sweet tidbit on to my cute juniors!"

"The rookie who faced off Heiwajima Shizuo? Let's get him to owe us one."



Somewhere in the city. Underground.

Despite having been confined underground for more than half a day, both Shiki and Kuon remained calm.

Shiki's subordinate would whimper every now and then, but at that point Shiki would glare at him silently, and he would immediately straighten himself out, only to have the process eventually repeat itself.

Perhaps due to their own reluctance to exchange information, or for fear of being overheard by the guards, they had spoken little, and time marched on tick by tick uneventfully.

They had been allotted a toilet break where their legs had been freed, though they were blindfolded until they reached the restroom and another guard stood outside the door—but as for sustenance they had received not even a drop of water.

Shiki's observations of the interior of the restroom and the distance between the rooms only solidified the idea that this was a villa.

He had tried many times to strike conversation, but all their guard had to say was, 'We can't tell you anything'.

This was not the style of the yakuza.

Shiki had inferred as much.

Everything they did gave off a sense of 'civilians using brute force', down to the way their captives were contained.

Normally civilians should have no need to resort to kidnapping, but Shiki had derived a hypothesis from what he had seen thus far.

And, so as to confirm it, Shiki called out to Kuon.

"Oi. Boy."

"Yes, can I help?"

After realising that he was dealing with yakuza, the boy had become remarkably polite.

Even so, Shiki could tell his respect was an act.

This he noticed because the boy was exceedingly similar to a man Shiki had worked with a lot in the past, Orihara Izaya, in every way, from his mannerisms to his choice of words. Izaya had not been so frivolous, but lacing the boy's words was the same malicious, probing intent.

"...When you first came, you said that Tatsugami Aya and Ai should be here."

"That's what I said, yes."

"**Which** did you mean?"

"What... do you mean, which?"

Kuon cocked his head, and Shiki clarified curtly, as if telling him there was no need to pretend,

"Did you mean the two of them were here as hostages like us? Or..."

"...If you're asking that at all, there's no need for me to answer, surely?"

Kuon smiled awkwardly, and just then, there was some commotion from the entrance.

"Oh... A new guest?"

Conversation temporarily aborted, Kuon and Shiki focused on the room's now-open door.

And met the newcomer: a schoolgirl bound in the same way as themselves.

As she wore the same uniform as Kuon, she was presumably from Raira Academy.

"Oh~? Himeka-chan!"

"...Kotonami-kun. It's good to see you safe."

The girl's blindfold was removed, and as the first thing she saw was Kuon's green hair, she greeted him expressionlessly.

"Since it's our touching reunion, could you, say, be more excited I'm alive and cry some tears of joy?"

"I'm sorry. I can't guarantee that you'll remain safe, so..."

"If you're going to apologise so frankly I'll fall into despair, so stop right there, okay?"

"Your sister was worried."

The moment those words left Himeka's lips, the smile on Kuon's face vanished.

"...You met?"

"The two of us met her."

Himeka phrased it so as to prevent the men from hearing Mizuchi's name.

She had deduced that avoiding names would be for the best not only because of the kidnappers; with just a glance she had noticed the sharp gaze of the man tied up beside Kuon, and guessed that he was on the other side of the law.

Kuon sunk into silence for a few seconds, but eventually he sighed deeply and shook his head.

"Damn... I can't believe she'd open the door to anyone outside of deliveries."

"Sorry. Does it bother you?"

"Nah, it's good. If she let you in I have no reason to complain."

She omitted how she had forced the door open, and skipped to the end of the story.

"She said you had a plan when you got yourself kidnapped... Do you know who the culprit is already?"

"...Just how much did she say?"

"...Up till someone called Orihara Izaya."

"..."

Orihara Izaya.

At the sound of that name, Shiki raised his eyebrows in surprise, from where he sat behind Kuon.

But the students continued, oblivious to his reaction.

"...Ahhh, I see. So she wound up telling that, too."

Kuon grinned, and with cold eyes, said:

"Then there's no need to hide anymore."

There was none of his usual jocosity in his voice; it was with a gaze like that of a snake eyeing its prey that he looked at Himeka and asked his next question.

"But I have a question. Himeka-chan, **when did you figure out the culprit?**"

"The ominous feeling was always there. I always thought what if... To be honest, the moment I found out the Headless Rider was a good person... I already knew there was no other possibility."



Her voice was even as always, but something in it seemed frailer than usual.

"Even so, it was hard to come to terms with. I was prepared for this to happen... But even now I'm hoping there's some mistake."

Just then, of the two adults who had silently listened on their conversation, the bald one shouted,

"Oi, don't have your own secret conversation! Say it in a way everyone gets!"

Right after, his head was kicked by the bound feet of the other man, presumably his superior.

"Gubeh... "

"Quiet. You're the only one who doesn't get it here."

"Huh? Wh, what's going on, Aniki!"

To the increasingly bewildered bald man, Kuon said, with a cold smile,

**"In other words, you two sirs were the first victims in this case."**

"..What?"

"Followed by myself, and now this girl, in that order."

"What are you saying now! From what I checked at least fifteen people were kidnapped!"

The bald man said. The man called Shiki replied.

"There was no kidnapping. We misinterpreted the situation this entire time."

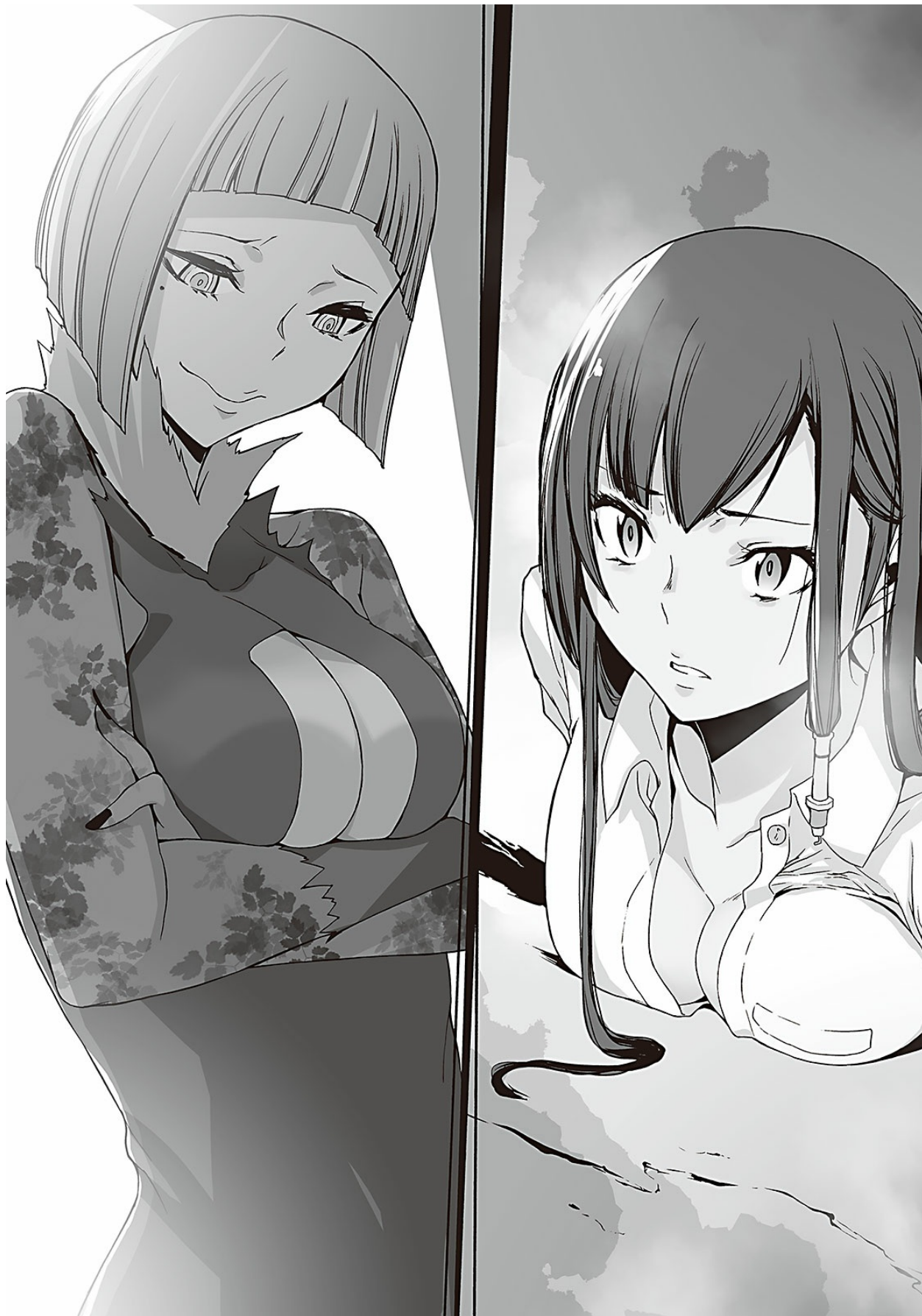
"Wha? Wh, what does that mean, Aniki!"

"The people who disappeared weren't abducted by the Headless Rider; they went into hiding in order to create that impression."

"...?"

The man's face remained confused and he tried to ask Shiki again—

Only to be interrupted by the opening of the door.



"So? Have you calmed down?"

The woman who had entered was smiling sweetly at Himeka's restrained form.

In answer, Himeka answered without a leak of emotion,

"I've been calm since the start. Can you say that for yourself?"

And then, after several moments, she uttered the following audibly to Kuon and their company:

"...**Nee-san.**"



Central Expressway.

A single van drove on this expressway towards Hachiōji.

It did not belong to the kidnappers.

It belonged to one of the adult members of Blue Square; a vehicle specifically for their gang's activities.

Even as the van shook around him, Kuronuma Aoba thought.

—To think Horada would be the first to get his hands on that information.

—Did I underestimate him...? He might be more capable than I thought.

Unaware that Horada's only true specialties lay in coincidences and brute force and nothing more, Aoba's initial evaluation of the man was wavering.

Aoba was generally in the passenger seat, but today he sat in the back, discussing the immediate future with the underclassman beside him.

"I'm surprised you actually came, Mizuchi-kun."

"Why? Of course I would. My classmates were kidnapped."

"...You really are out of this world. Wouldn't one normally leave it to the police?"

Upon Aoba's mention of the sensible option, Yahiro reflected for a moment before answering.

"Now that you mention it. That makes sense. Why didn't you call the police?"

"We have a couple of black marks ourselves, so we can't carelessly draw that kind of attention. And apparently they can't act on anonymous calls immediately."

With a wry smile, Aoba came clean with his side's motives:

"We're not philanthropists here. There are benefits to getting the edge over this organization before the police step in, is all. But to think you never even thought of calling the police until I mentioned it... I have to say I'm impressed."

"I've only ever brought trouble to the police, so I try not to get them involved."

"I see."

Aoba nodded once, and laid down a single card from his hand:

"You don't have any good memories with the police in Haburagi, perhaps?"

"..."

Yahiro slowly, wordlessly, turned his gaze on Aoba.

Aoba remained facing away from him, and continued, gaze fixed outside the window.

"I'm sorry, but I had my friends look you up, just a little. You were quite the problem child in your village, no? There's a guy who had every bone in his legs shattered, who's still in hospital even now."

"..."

Aoba slowly, deliberately turned towards Yahiro, continuing brightly.

"Why would a person like you come to Ikebukuro? Did you get bored of your hometown and come to Tokyo seeking stronger fighters? Say, for instance, Heiwajima Shizuo..."

And there—Aoba found himself cut off.

Yahiro had not done anything in particular.

He had simply met Aoba's eyes with his own.

"..."

But that alone was sufficient to halt Aoba from speaking further.

It felt as if the temperature in the van had suddenly dropped a few degrees.

Aoba felt as if a bottomless darkness had just opened up before him.

There was a darkness in Mizuchi Yahiro's eyes, almost as if he were a different person entirely; and in that moment he understood:

That his current situation was akin to treading a tightrope between skyscrapers.

That a single slip would plunge him into unbelievable danger.

"Kuronuma-sempai."

An inflectionless voice.

His tone was such that it would have been utterly unsurprising if he proceeded to say, "Please die," and snap Aoba's neck.

But Aoba's character was not so soft that something of this degree could cow him.

"Yes?"

Aoba smiled faintly.

"The man whose arms and legs I broke... **He rammed me with a dump truck.**"

"..."

"He was driving without a license, not to mention after hitting me with the truck he and his friends ganged up on me with pickaxes... so even going that far was settled as legal self-defence."

Yahiro recited this calmly, so calmly, as though he were reading out from a diary.

Aoba doubted it was a proper application of self-defence laws, but refrained from nitpicking.

Something like that was trivial compared to what Yahiro was saying presently.

"Today they try to kill me with a truck. What if next they break into the house and kill even my family—I was scared, so scared, I didn't know what to do."

"...And then?"

"And so I thought, it would be best to make it so he can never drive again. That's all."

Yahiro stated unflinchingly. A shudder ran down Aoba's spine.

It was not out of fear; it was from the surge of excitement upon knowing the person before him was not 'normal' in the least.

—I see; so this is Mizuchi Yahiro.

—...Interesting.

"Kuronuma-sempai, did you think I had nothing better to pass time with than fighting people...?"

Seeing that Aoba had gone silent with a complicated expression, Yahiro continued.

"I've never enjoyed fighting once in my—"

Life, he was about to say, when his voice cut off.

Flashing through his mind was his fight with Shizuo the day previous; Shizuo's fist rushing towards him. It was a powerful blow that would have been a traumatic experience for anyone else. Yet even so—that one fight was unlike any of its precedents. Of this he was sure. Even if one were to ask why, it was difficult for Yahiro to articulate in words. Even though he himself was confused, he had gathered. That he, who had only ever been regarded as a monster, had been granted a chance for change. Yet meanwhile Yahiro was aware that this chance was shrouded in dark clouds.

—Ahh, so that's how it is.

—In the end it comes down to this.

He had learnt these past few days that Kuronuma Aoba was not the innocuous person he appeared to be. But he had not expected Aoba to investigate his history and bring it up in his new life in Ikebukuro.

—So in the end, even here, there's nowhere to run.

Now that he thought of it it was unsurprising that just like how he had been able to read up on the Headless Rider and Heiwajima Shizuo, the people of Tokyo could just as easily look him up. In the end, what it came down to was that he had done those things back at his hometown. Yahiro, consumed by these brooding thoughts, slowly closed his eyes.

“...Sorry, I got a little emotional.”

With that he averted his eyes from Aoba, to the scenery outside the window. The orange light illuminating the expressway shone down on Yahiro's melancholy face.

—What am I on my way to do.

—Help Tatsugami-san?

—Do I even have that right?

—To help anyone when I'm such a monster...

Memories flashed through the boy's mind. Pinned on himself, the eyes of all kinds of people. Eyes. Eyes. Unable to bear those looks, Yahiro had increasingly wanted to turn his back on all of those eyes.

—No, nothing will change if I don't overcome this.

—I need a turning point, anything.

—Anything so I can move just one step, whether it's forward or back—

Yahiro clenched his fists; without any specific god or demon in mind, he simply prayed. Suddenly—

A shadow.

The sudden appearance of the oddity snapped Yahiro out of his thoughts.

—...?!

A pure mass of darkness, reflecting no light at all, neither the orange streetlights or the headlights of the vehicles behind, crossed Yahiro's line of sight—passing right beside the Blue Square van.

“Headless Rider-san...?”

“Oi Aoba, what the hell! You called the Headless Rider?!”

The driver shouted agitatedly. Aoba replied,

“I was thinking to do that after getting proper evidence... I haven't yet.”

"The motorcycle leading the Headless Rider—I've seen it before! It's Jyan Jyaka Jyan!"

"Ah, does that mean the Awakusu-kai got a lead?"

Aoba was saying ruefully, when he noticed.

"Hm...?"

A group of motorcyclists in white riding suits were following Celty at a distance.

"Is that... Dragon Zombie?!"

An odd collective had emerged on the highway; consisting of black tailed by white.

Aoba smiled happily at the realisation that they were getting caught up in a very strange series of events.

"Looks like things... are getting more heated than expected."

"We're lucky we're not late to the party, in a sense."

♂♀

Tatsugami Himeka did not think herself unfortunate.

Conversely, neither did she think she was blessed.

In the end, was her life a good one or bad?

Himeka was unable to gauge this objectively.

She was strong.

That said, she was not especially athletic or clever.

It was simply that she had, since birth, possessed more courage than most.

Even as a young child she could not be spurred to cry in a haunted house, or scream on a roller coaster.

If she were asked how it was she would say, "It was extremely scary." But with her unruffled tone of voice few would have believed her.

Since she was conscious of the world around her she had lived with the truths her surroundings presented her.

The intimidating mien of her father as he hollered at her mother, or punched people she did not know.

The gentle smile of that same father, almost as if he were a different man, as he ruffled her hair; the warmth of his hand.

The revelation, when her younger sister was born, that her father was a criminal.

An illicit moneylender. In other words, that her father had been a loan shark that had made countless people suffer.

When Himeka was still in elementary school—her older sister had exposed their father's company's secrets to the police, in hopes he would be arrested. She had lived with this, as well.

With the shunning of her classmates upon her father's arrest.

With her standing in the class growing stronger instead when she proved herself unfazed by these hardships.

With her young classmates suddenly pandering to her when that happened.

With her mother gradually falling to pieces after her father disappeared from their home.

Even as her mother feared her perpetually yelling father, perhaps she had also loved him after all.

Or perhaps she had mistaken a fear-induced loyalty as love.

Himeka had been unable to understand, but it was between the two, she had thought there was no need to pry.

Whichever it was, her mother had created a dream world in her own shadow to bury her grief, and simply, simply rambled on to the pitch darkness cast on the wall.

In that false reality it seemed that her father would not only shout at her mother, but even beat her. Often her mother would call out Himeka and her sisters' names, mumbling, 'Don't leave me alone. Don't leave me alone with someone

like that.'

Why was it that in fantasy she made herself suffer even more than in reality, and could that truly be called a fantasy then? Himeka had not understood—but even without understanding, she embraced her mother as she was, and cherished her as family.

Furthermore, even while she thought her arrested father was hopeless trash as a human being, she loved him as a family member still.

She wished that he would turn a new leaf and return a better person after his sentence, and would support him completely in starting anew.

Himeka's mistake was in not noticing that she was a strong person herself.

Thus she had believed that her sisters would likewise live with the card they had been dealt; there was no doubt of it in her mind.

Until she heard from her older sister's mouth her hatred for the world itself.

When Himeka was in middle school, her older sister, a college student, was stabbed by a client of her father's.

'I can't even borrow from other lenders anymore since they suspect I leaked the information,'  
was what he had wailed in the interrogation room, she was told.

The man had been a director of a factory in a small town, and because banks had been reluctant to loan money, he had turned to loan sharks in a time of crisis. But his factory had gone bankrupt due to the rumours, and after being thrown out onto the streets he had lashed out violently.

Indeed, Aya had been familiar with the face of that director, and had passed details of his transactions to the police. Of course, she had never imagined it would result in this.

Himeka had learnt of this afterwards; it seemed that there were many people who, even knowing of the illegal interest rates, sought to take advantage of loan sharks themselves.

Even so, Himeka did not think of illegal lending as a necessary evil.

Her father had done it for his own interest, and even if he had helped the factory director in some way, he had also forced many other people out of their homes in his business.

That was why she did not think her sister's actions were wrong, and felt that that director should have blamed the poor financial climate that had caused banks to withhold loans in the first place.

Even though Himeka was greatly distressed by her sister's assault, with this logic she overcame that shock, and in order to support her sister she kept up casual conversation.

—*"Why is this happening to me?"*

—*"I did the right thing, right? Himeka?"*

Indeed. Her sister had done the right thing.

Himeka thought so, and said just as much.

Nee-san did the right thing, but there was no guarantee she would be rewarded for it.

Maybe this is just how the world is.

I can't say if the gods really exist. Even if they do, they can't instantly help people who do the right thing. So let's fight through this together.

Himeka said this innocently, but her sister replied:

—*"...You say such cruel things so easily."*

—*"Do you know what our broken mother said to the wall?"*

—*"She said... 'Don't report your father to the police. We're family.' ..."*

—*"Is that how the world should be to her?"*

—*"Are you saying the world is right when I have to hear that from my own mother?"*

—*"I don't want that. I can't think like you."*

—*"I refuse to look at the world so coldly like I know everything already and give up just like that."*

Those words stabbed at Himeka's heart.

It was not that her sister was right.

Himeka did not remember ever looking at things coldly; it was because she was truly suffering that she did not want to give up.

It inevitably hurt that she was perceived to be doing the opposite.

But Himeka was resilient by nature, and enduring that hurt, without crying or becoming agitated, she persisted in continuing a casual conversation with her sister, who could not move in her injured state.

Yet, to her mother and sisters, not to say outsiders, Himeka's strength was abnormal.

'That girl has no feelings.'

This thought would even cross their minds.

She was no less sensitive than the people around her; her heart possessed the same spectrum of emotions.

If there was something funny, she would laugh. In that she was the same as anyone else.

But she had endured much more sadness and suffering than happiness; too much more.

For that reason she was almost immovable, and could bottle up even extreme anger and swallow down tears of grief.

It was not that her ability to express emotions was inferior in any way.

Tatsugami Himeka's problem came before that step.

For better or worse, she was highly resilient to any obstacle that sought to attack her emotionally.

Because of that strength, the path she walked did not meet.

With those of the sisters she treasured more than herself.

The arrest of their father and the hardship that had followed, the assault of their sister who had done the right thing, the crumbling of their mother: her younger sister Ai had not been strong enough to endure the brutality of their reality.

Their oldest sister, while able to return to college after a full recovery, fell into limbo about her undecided future career after her hospitalisation, and seemed to have felt it was only more proof of the world's unfairness.

And one day, while watching the television, her older sister had murmured.

—*"The Headless... Rider..."*

Anyone who had stayed in Ikebukuro for long knew of it.

Himeka had been surprised when she first saw the silent motorcyclist herself, but at the time all she thought was that it was a 'an unusual speedster on a strange motorcycle'.

She was not alone. To many people living in Ikebukuro at the time, that was their vague impression of the Headless Rider as well.

But one day things changed.

The Headless Rider, previously an unidentified being, had showed itself on television.

As if to flaunt its own existence, the Headless Rider had displayed impossible feats, creating a giant scythe from shadows emitted from its body, and scaling a building on speed alone.

Himeka had thought it was amazing, but had not paid much mind, thinking it might be edited footage.



But since then, the Headless Rider had come to use its superhuman powers even in the day; even in front of people. It was as if the city itself had accepted the Headless Rider into its fold.

Aya had probably seen it directly at some point.

She began to research the Headless Rider like a woman possessed, rambling about how it was a being that had shed the shackles of common sense, of the rules of the world.

Himeka noticed.

That Aya was experiencing a form of fanaticism.

She believed that while the society around her was untouchable and unreasonable, the Headless Rider was a being more illogical than that society itself, come to punch a hole through its fabric.

Perhaps the Headless Rider was truly some kind of ghost; or perhaps it was along the lines of an angel or demon. Just proving that alone would alter the rules of the world.

She did not know if the state of society would evolve or regress.

Whether the Headless Rider would be laid bare by science, or worshipped as a deity.

Whichever happened, the world would change.

The Headless Rider would lead them out of this unfair world.

Without any kind of proof, Aya was convinced of this.

Despite the fact that the Headless Rider had not come here to save anyone, even if it was indeed a being that bypassed the laws of the world.

In the first place, the Headless Rider had apparently been in Ikebukuro for twenty years at least. If it was here as a saviour, it should have saved Aya from being stabbed previously.

That was why, to Himeka, the Headless Rider was no more than a 'stranger with unbelievable powers'.

But she was not inclined to persuade anyone of it.

Because for Aya the Headless Rider was a source of strength to go on living, and just by existing in the city it had without a doubt saved her older sister.

This was what she thought.

Until the Headless Rider vanished from the streets of Ikebukuro.

At first it had only been rumours, but as the days passed and the Headless Rider showed no hide or hair, Aya grew visibly high-strung.

At times Himeka even saw her whispering to the wall by herself, like their mother.

—*"The Headless Rider will take us away."*

—*"The Headless Rider will help us escape this world."*

This was what Aya had mumbled. Ai was similarly influenced, and the both of them had even gone out into the streets to search for the Headless Rider.

The Headless Rider had given the sisters hope, but vanished without fulfilling it.

Even knowing that her resentment was unwarranted, Himeka had been unable to bring herself to like the being.

She even thought the Headless Rider might truly be a demon who offered false hopes to people only to thrust them into despair.

At the same time she knew having such unsavoury thoughts about a being she had never met was low of her, and the feeling that she was no better than the man who had stabbed her sister, or even beneath him, pained her.

She felt that she herself was, to the Headless Rider, being unfair.

Although it never showed on her face, these heavy thoughts continued to plague Himeka, accumulating in her mind.

One day, Aya's mood suddenly lifted.

Following that, Ai had become strange as well.

At that time, Aya had asked Himeka countless times,

—*"Maybe it's just as you said, Himeka; maybe there are no gods."*

—*"But if there is no god, why don't we just create our own?"*

Uncomprehending, Himeka had answered vaguely—but Aya had continued dreamily.

—*"You don't have to try so hard anymore, Himeka. You'll understand eventually."*

In the district of Ikebukuro, now bereft of the Headless Rider, it was Aya who most craved its presence.

And one month after—Aya had gone missing.

At the same time as Ai, who had been equally fervent in pursuing the Headless Rider.

For an average person the shock of losing both sisters at once would have impaired logical thought. But Himeka had had the resilience to overcome this shock and arrive at a certain theory.

—Had Aya truly been kidnapped?

Upon seeing the notes Aya had left in the magazine's editorial department, Himeka was deeply disturbed.

For one, it was written all too calmly for Aya, who had thoroughly worshipped the Headless Rider—and the information in the memo was meager compared to what she brought up so passionately at home.

—Impossible.

She had had a sense of foreboding; had been aware of the possibility.

Nevertheless she wanted to deny it.

She wanted to believe her sisters would not do something so foolish.

Himeka loved both her sisters as family.

That was why, if forced to choose between the Headless Rider and her family, Himeka had firmly decided to believe in them.

And now.

Himeka reunited with Aya in the worst of circumstances.

Or, if death or irreparable injury were the worst circumstances, this would surely come right after.

In the basement of this villa a distance from Ikebukuro, Himeka learnt:

That her sister was not a victim—but had all along been on the side of the 'culprit'.

"It's been a long time, Himeka. How many days?"

The woman Himeka had greeted as her sister looked down at her prone form, smiling somewhat hollowly.

Himeka met that gaze with a cool expression.

"Weren't we together in the van for quite some time just earlier? Though I was lying down, so I didn't see your face well."

"Oh? Really—... Ah, that might have been the case."

Himeka's sister, Tatsugami Aya, said this with a calm face, and, still smiling, said something very odd.

"It's great you arrived safely. It's all right, everyone here is very nice."

"...What are you saying, Nee-san?"

"The Headless Rider Celty-sama will return. Everything will be fine."

"Nee-san?"

Noticing that what they said was not matching up, Himeka's face morphed to one of wariness.

"We'll be ushering in a new age. You'll bear witness to it too."

"What are you saying... Nee-san... Is Mom safe?"

"Mom? Oh, she was talking to the bathroom wall. But it's fine, since she belongs to Dad. Neither you nor Ai have to suffer over our parents anymore. Everything is thanks to Celty-sama. Dad will die off somewhere in jail, I know it. And Celty-sama will help Mom, too. Yes, it's all okay, everything will be fine, it's fine..."

"Stop it... Nee-san, you're just using the Headless Rider as an excuse to escape. You'll cause a lot of trouble for that person."

Himeka said. Aya tilted her head violently, and asked Himeka:

"That person? Meaning Celty-sama?"

The smile was still on her face, but in her voice there was an infinite iciness.

"...Yes."

"What do you know about Celty-sama?"

"I know because I was told directly."

Aya's smile vanished upon hearing those words.

"...What? What do you mean?"

"That is..."

Himeka faltered, and instead, Kuon spoke up.

"We were together when we met Celty-san."

A single, challenging statement.

At that point, time froze in the room.

Aya's sombre silence drove the men around her to speechlessness as well.

"...Why?"

She spoke quietly, breaking the silence.

"Why? Why you?"

"Nee-san..."

"It's all wrong. The world is wrong, after all. We have to run... quickly, quickly, into the black smoke..."

Aya mumbled these ridiculous words. Himeka yelled back,

"Nee-san, stop already! I don't believe you were the one who started something like this! Who instigated you?!"

"Instigated...? No, Himeka. We were inspired. To lift ourselves from that rotted mud... I'm feeling very, very good right now. Isn't that proof enough? Do you get it?"

"What..."

Still their conversation was not matching up.

Just as Himeka found herself at a loss for words, Shiki whispered from behind her.

"I believe it's useless trying to persuade her now, Miss."

"Huh...?"

"That is... Do brace yourself for this—it seems your sister is **under the influence of drugs**."

"...!"

Himeka's face, which had been steely up till now, paled.

"Her eyes and expression... are familiar. Those who dabbled in the drug Heaven Slave all gave off this vibe. I hear it

acts up the moment they encounter something they don't want. They get enveloped by bliss and can't see or hear anything undesirable."

'Undesirable' in this case was probably that Himeka had met Celty before her. Himeka realised this instantly, and that her sister was truly not in her right mind at the moment.

"What...!"

"She's still in the first stages. If she's stopped soon, there's hope for her yet."

Kuon, who had been listening, decided to take over from Himeka who was in shock, asked Tatsugami Aya,

"Hey, lady? So Ai-san is safe, right?"

At the mention of her sister's name, Aya thought for a while before she answered.

"Ai? Ai... Oh! Yes, of course, don't worry. Ai-chan's doing what she needs to do. She's going to fetch that junior of hers who was talking so familiarly with Celty-sama and Heiwajima Shizuo."

Shiki's subordinate stiffened abruptly at this answer.

"This may be sudden, but what was the child's name?"

"Oh, what was it? Well... um... right, Akane-chan, was it?"

"..." "A, Aniki!"

Shiki's face soured, and his subordinate was visibly dismayed.

Smoothing over his expression, Shiki continued calmly.

"Why that girl?"

Perhaps she found the question amenable; unlike with Himeka, this time she replied properly.

"Heiwajima Shizuo's a human who's surpassed humanity, so he has the right to talk to Celty-sama. But we can't allow an ordinary child to approach and make friends so fearlessly."

As she said this she smiled softly, and kicked Kuon's head.

"Ga...!"

"Nee-san, stop!"

"It's alright, Himeka. We don't intend to kill him. Just give him some time to reflect... And have him go missing for us."

Himeka found herself once again stunned by her sister, who had just said something of such grave consequence so casually.

"Are you... Are you going to blame it all on Celty-san?!"

To that, Aya cocked her head, confused.

"? What are you saying? Celty-sama was the one who took all of you. We know Celty-sama's will. Our will is the will of Celty-sama."

"..."

"We're protecting the legend of the Headless Rider who's disappeared from Ikebukuro. Right now it's only a missing persons case, but the rumours are there. They say the people taken by the Headless Rider crossed the shadow into a world without suffering."

Nothing was getting through.

It was not that she was avoiding their questions; by her face it seemed she honestly believed what she was saying.

There was no trace of the rational magazine reporter; Aya stood before Himeka as no more than a blind fanatic.

Himeka averted her gaze, and lived with the irrevocable reality she had been given.

—Nee-san is wrong.

—Even so, I won't run from Nee-san, or from Ai.

—Reality, the Headless Rider... I won't run from anything.

With that conviction, she spoke to her sister.

"Nee-san... Please, could you please meet with the Headless Rider and talk? I know you'll understand if you talk."

"It's fine, Himeka. We're already happy enough. When we create and spread an urban legend of our own it's almost as if we've become part of that legend ourselves... My senior at work said that; and how true. But it's not 'almost'. We already are a part of the great Headless Rider."

Her sister's eyes brimmed with a tranquil madness; but Himeka met that gaze fully and began to try again.

However—before that could happen, the door opened, and the man who entered whispered into Aya's ear.

"...Ai?"

With that murmur, Aya headed for the exit anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Himeka. It seems Ai failed to kidnap that Akane girl."

"Huh?"

Himeka's eyes rounded in surprise, and behind her Shiki exhaled in relief.

"It's alright, I'll get it done properly."

"Wait, Nee-sa ..."

Aya slammed the door, leaving only one man to guard them.

As if running from the reality of Himeka's words.



Somewhere in Hachiōji.

'...Fancy meeting you here.'

After receiving a message from Mizuchi Yahiro, Cely had chosen to rendezvous with the boy some way from the place the Awakusu-kai were gathering their men.

"Sorry. I'm surprised myself."

'But what are you doing here?'

"Actually..."

Yahiro explained his situation, and Cely huffed as she processed their situation.

'So it was Kuronuma Aoba. Just where did he get that information?'

It was unbelievable, but the boy had an information network almost as good as Izaya's.

Although she had suspicions that he might be tapping into the Awakusu's communications, she chose not to pry.

'But what are you going to do? Since you're here already, does that mean you're planning to barge into their base with Aoba's group?'

"Two of my friends were kidnapped. I can't do nothing."

'I would tell you to leave it to the police, but I don't have the right... But it's not necessary for you to put yourself in danger.'

"Even if there's no need, I feel like it's something I must do. Please let me help."

Even knowing that what he was saying was irrational, Yahiro did not fall back.

"If I stop here, I feel like this turning point will slip from my hands..."

'Turning point?'

Cely asked. Yahiro shook his head anxiously, and diverted the conversation.

"I know I'm being unreasonable. But... since Kuon-kun and Tatsugami-san have been kidnapped, I might be next; I can be bait at the very least."

'I never thought even Himeka-chan would be abducted...'

Had Yahiro been an ordinary high schooler Celty would have insisted that he stayed far from the danger, but by now she had realised he was not ordinary in the least.

In a sense, he was a milder Heiwajima Shizuo. If this was a straightforward brawl she would not stop him, but in this case they knew absolutely nothing of their opponent. To put it crudely, for all she knew their enemies could be the kind to whip out guns and start shooting randomly.

—The we have those hot-blooded Awakusu men, and even Dragon Zombie...

And to add oil to the fire now Blue Square, too.

Dragon Zombie and Blue Square's relationship was nowhere near friendly. And if Dragon Zombie's rival gang Jyan Jyaka Jyan came along, just one spark would cause an all-out war.

—And the kidnappers tried to go after the Leader's granddaughter Akane-chan. The Awakusu-kai won't be in the mood to hold back; they might even have guns with them.

Celty shook her head of the negative thoughts, and went back to Yahiro to ask,

'What is your goal?'

"Huh?"

'In the past, there was a child who came to Ikebukuro to seek out the extraordinary. Even now I'm not sure if I should have stopped him when he first stepped into the underside of society, like you're doing right now. But he stepped out after getting horribly injured. If someone gets hurt because of the ideals they have then yes, it's fully deserved. But I don't recommend involving yourself with this side of the world for some rash emotion.'

Celty looked straight at the boy before her, remembering a certain other boy from the past as she continued.

'Tell me. Did you have a good reason for coming to Ikebukuro?'

And Yahiro, after a moment of silence—looked straight at Celty, and spoke.

"Celty-san."

'Yeah?'

"...I'm going to ask something incredibly rude. You can hit me for it if you like."

'? Uh, I don't think I would hit someone over a question...'

Celty tilted her head curiously. Yahiro took a deep breath, and chose, with determination, to confess.

Why he had come to this city.

What he had been labelled in his hometown.

"When everyone calls you a monster... what do you feel?"



Basement at the villa.

"What do we do, if we don't do something Akane-chan..."

Himeka had agonised over her inability to communicate with her sister, but that sadness was quickly suppressed, and she spoke now with a collected voice.

Shiki replied from behind,

"Your sister and her cohorts won't get the second chance they're after."

"?"

Kuon, sensing Himeka's unvoiced question, answered instead of Shiki.

"That Akane-chan she mentioned is probably Awakusu Akane. She's the granddaughter of the Awakusu-kai's leader."

"...You know a lot about this, boy."

"We go to the same dojo."

"...I see, so you're from Rakuei Gym."

Shiki nodded, seemingly satisfied by the explanation.

Kuon nodded back, and said, lowly so the guard could not hear,

"To put it simply... Everyone in this villa just made the Awakusu-kai their enemy."

Shiki elaborated:

"Miss Akane should have guards on standby. If so, we can assume the ones who failed to kidnap her are already being tailed."

"Wait, you mean..."

"Yes, in other words... there are any number of the Awakusu-kai heading here right now."

"..."

At Shiki's words, Himeka's expression grew conflicted.

Even though there was relief at the prospect of rescue, to her it must have been more worrying that her sister had made enemies of yakuza.

"Oi, what are you mumbling about..."

The guard moved towards them with a frown, suspicious of their whispered conversation.

"Ah, sorry. We got some blood on the floor, so we were worried about it."

"Blood?"

The man, confused, came closer.

So he was a normal civilian after all. He examined the four of them without any sort of wariness—

And Shiki slammed a palm into his nose bridge.

"Fugo..."

His face jerked back, and began to bleed heavily from his nostrils.

Shiki, who at some point in time had freed all of his limbs, stood quickly and grabbed the man's head and his right wrist.

"Now..."

"Hii—"

The man whimpered as his hand was forced behind his back, and his hair pulled.

Then Shiki manipulated his centre of gravity, and smashed his face into the corner of a shelf.

"~~!"

The man let out a strangled cry; Shiki swung him around again, crashing his face onto the floor.

There was a sickening crack, and the others realised the man's nose had been broken.

To the unconscious man, who still had blood dribbling from his nose, Shiki said,

"See? There's blood now."

Shiki shrugged; Kuon asked, in shock,

"Wha... When did you get free...?"

"I've been free from the start, but I thought it would be good to stay quiet until we learnt more about them. This kind of

bond is nothing in our line of work..."

"Uh, um..."

While Shiki fished out the man's smartphone, his bald subordinate spoke up, uncomfortably.

"Aniki... I wasn't able to untie myself, could you please help...?"

♂♀

Near the villa.

'I see... So then you decided to look for Shizuo and me.'

Celty, after listening Yahiro out, calmly showed the boy these words.

'So, was Shizuo a monster?'

"...in terms of strength, yes."

'Other than that?'

"...he's a good person."

Celty whistled internally at that answer.

There were very few able to say Shizuo 'was a good person' immediately after getting beaten up by him at full strength.

"He was angry on behalf of you and his brother. I thought it was really incredible that he was so angry not for himself but because his friend had been made fun of."

'Ah, I see.'

—Well, he's often angry for selfish reasons, too.

Celty had this thought, but did not derail the conversation with it, and continued to listen quietly.

"I was called a monster by many, many people, but I've always tried to live as peacefully as I could... I wonder why I couldn't become like him..."

—...Shizuo... Peaceful...

The road signs and lampposts Shizuo had broken flashed through Celty's mind; Celty thought briefly that Yahiro ought not to look up to him so much, but decided that she had no right to comment as an unlicensed road user.

"I thought that maybe I wasn't alone... I thought if I came to Ikebukuro and spoke to other people who were called monsters I could find my own meaning in life... I'm so sorry."

'You don't really need to apologise. From humans' perspective I really am a monster.'

As she said this, Celty casually removed her helmet.

"I"

All there was beneath was the cross-section of a neck, spewing forth black shadows.

Yahiro was shocked by her sudden revelation, but he calmed his breathing and said.

"You really... aren't human."

'You don't seem very scared.'

"No, my legs are shaking."

Yahiro whispered, swallowing; clenching his fists, he spoke guiltily.

What he feared was not the headless visage of Celty—his terror was at how small he was before this bona fide monster.

"It must be a bother for you, being grouped with some lukewarm person who gets called a monster just because of certain actions."



'Isn't it fine to become one?'

Yahiro had bowed his head again, but Celty interrupted him with her smartphone.

"...huh?"

'If you don't like being in the middle, becoming a monster's not a terribly bad idea.'

Years ago, Celty would never have dreamed of saying those words.

'Don't be scared of becoming a monster.'

There was a time in Celty's life where she was extremely conscious of the fact that she was not human.

At that time, this awareness had driven a rift between herself and humanity.

'Even if you were headless like me... **You're still you.**'

What had bridged that rift was not her wanting to become human.

It was meeting a person; a meeting that she now considered her fortune.

'The world is a big place. Have faith in your future... I can't say anything awe-inspiring, but... there will be someone who believes in you, who loves you, even as a monster.'

The face of the man who truly loved her for her monstrous self was in her mind.

The face of the man who was, at the same time, the one she truly loved.

"Someone who... believes in me?"

'So long as you don't lose faith in that person you'll meet someday, whether you're a human, whether you're a monster—'

'You will always, always be Mizuchi Yahiro.'

"Ah..."

In that moment, Yahiro felt that the headless woman was smiling.

That alone was enough.

The smile of the Headless Rider was the best turning point to push Yahiro forward.



Basement at the villa.

After Shiki had released his subordinate, he left him with instructions to free Kuon and Himeka,

In that time he started up the smartphone from their guard, and with a map application checked their current location.

Then using an online search he brought up the details of the building they were currently in.

"Hmph. The era of convenience."

As Shiki murmured this, his eyes roved over the words, 'Owned by Shijima Properties. Villa'.

Apparently this whole area belonged to Shijima Group, and was currently on sale.

The name Shijima was not unfamiliar.

—So this incident might be linked to him.

—Not to mention Shijima's the only one who trafficked Heaven Slave...So, he caught on to me when I was researching the case and hit two birds with one stone?

By kidnapping Shiki, a member of the yakuza, the public's attention would be on the Headless Rider finally attacking the Awakusu-kai, while at the same time revenge would be wrought against the Awakusu-kai, which had crushed his drug group.

—But why now?

—Did he assemble the Headless Rider cultists as a smokescreen to revive his drug cartel?

—Was he the kind of person to drag civilians into the fray so carelessly?

But in the first place, if Shijima had a hand in this, wouldn't he have come to kill Shiki hours ago?

Shiki's mind was filled with questions, but he judged that the information he had was of little use at the moment, and chose to handle their short-term plans first.

First he had to use the phone to contact the Awakusu-kai, through his superior Awakusu Mikiya.

Shiki, who had painfully memorised all of the important officers' numbers for emergencies like this, dialed his number directly and called him.

'...Who is this?'

Mikiya's voice was suspicious. Probably because it was a foreign number calling him.

"Pardon, Mikiya-san. It's me."

'! Shiki?! Where are you now!'

"Hachiōji. We're in the heart of their base right now. Is Miss Akane safe?"

'I was told that people tried to kidnap her earlier, but she was saved by your underlings. Thanks.'

His thanks was curt, but Shiki paid little mind to that and explained his situation to Mikiya. Perhaps mindful of Himeka so near him, he made no mention of Aya.

"There are plenty of people here under drugs, but it's likely that Shijiima orchestrated the situation. Whether or not there's anyone pulling his strings I've yet to find out."

'...Akabayashi's bosozoku and Aozaki's lackeys are on their way. Make sure you don't get dragged in.'

At Mikiya's words, Shiki frowned.

"Aozaki didn't let them bring guns, did he."

The faction of the Awakusu-kai under the fighter named Aozaki consisted solely of hot-blooded people, down to the man himself. If one ignored the drugs, these kidnappers were actually regular civilians; a bullet hitting any of them would spell the demise of the entire Awakusu-kai.

'We can only have faith in his judgment. If I weren't in this position I'd be raiding the place myself.'

"I suppose I can only try my best not to escalate things."

After a few more words Shiki ended the call, and turned around to face Kuon and Himeka.

"We'll be heading out now; you should avoid running around carelessly."

"No... I'm coming. I'm worried about my sister."

Himeka announced this calmly, unafraid even after ascertaining what kind of person Shiki was.

Even if Shiki thought she was brave, he had no reason to bring a civilian around.

Just as he was wondering if he should have left her restrained, the sound of footsteps came down the stairs towards them.

Shiki glanced at his bald underling in silent instruction, and the man nodded, hiding behind the door.

And, when the door was opened, the man lunged at the newcomer—

In a second he was countered, and passed out with his eyes rolling up.

"!"

Shiki's breath hitched as he saw how, too precisely, that blow had targeted the man's temple—

But before he could grow wary, he noticed the figure behind the newcomer.

The figure that, excluding the helmet, was as if a shadow had taken human form.

"Tatsugami-san! Kuon-kun! You're safe!"

As they saw Yahiro rushing to them, Himeka and Kuon's eyes widened.

"Mizuchi-kun?!"

"Yahiro?! And... Celty-san?!"

For an instant he felt relieved that the two who had called his name seemed unhurt—

But at the sight of the man beside them, Yahiro shuddered.

The experience he had accumulated over many years, alongside the instincts that had accompanied him from birth told him.

That this man was, in a different way from Shizuo, a highly dangerous person.

But the man with the dangerous aura—bowed deeply to Celty.

"Thank goodness. Your presence is a great help, Celty-san."

'Shiki-san! You're safe!'

"Yeah, somehow. You figured we were in the basement?"

'We snuck in from the back door, then we caught one of the guards on the way in and threatened him for directions.'

Celty typed. Shiki replied,

"...I think the threatening was unnecessary."

'? Speaking of which, he was smiling and crying at the same time... What a weird reaction...'

"Unsurprising. Anyway, it's a relief you made it here first. I'm sure we can trust you with the students once it gets messy."

The man glanced at Kuon and Himeka as he said this, and Yahiro figured that he was not an enemy—

At the same time, he suddenly realised.

"Um, could it be that that man... wasn't one of the kidnappers?"

Yahiro flustered as he looked down at the bald man at his feet, but the sharp-eyed man simply sighed and replied with a wry smile.

"He was the one who misunderstood and attacked you first, so it's not your fault. Getting defeated by a child is embarrassing enough he won't spread it, not that I'll let him."

Yahiro calmed down with that, and bowed his head again.

"Alright then. When he wakes up, please tell him I'm really sorry."

Usually he would have woken the man and apologised immediately, but being short on time, Yahiro turned towards his friends instead.

"You have to get away quickly. It's going to get troublesome very soon."

But Himeka shook her head.

"No, I can't leave Nee-san."

'Right, your sisters were kidnapped too. So they're in a different room...'

Celty typed for Himeka reassuringly.

'I'll be the decoy, and all of you can escape from the back. Is that fine?'

"...No, that's not it, Celty-san."

'Huh?'

Celty faltered; Himeka bit her lip, and explained.

"Both of my sisters... were on the kidnappers' side..."

'Wha... How did that happen?!'

Celty asked in shock. Shiki replied, cynically,  
“Whatever it is, it’s because you’ve been too careless.”

♂♀

Near the villa.

“...What are Dragon Zombie weaklings doing here?”

“Doesn’t that go for you too? Jyan Jyaka Jyan gathering in Hachiōji—not gonna stink up Ikebukuro anymore?”

With multiple groups assembling on the villa grounds, friction between the gangs was, naturally, building up. The higher command of both Dragon Zombie and Jyan Jyaka Jyan were of course better-informed of the situation and thus calmer, but the more hot-tempered members were beginning to scuffle.

“Say again? Maybe you’re working with those kidnappers, huh?”

“Don’t yell in my face, you saying the noses of the Awakusu dogs are so rotten you can’t even differentiate between us and kidnappers?”

“Aa?”

“Fuck off!”

The argument devolved into unintelligible yelling, filmed from afar by yet another party.

“Goodness, at this rate everyone in the villa must’ve noticed them by now.”

In the corner of a car park some distance away, Aoba said the above as he operated a video camera inside the van.

“Your voice is in the vid.”

“It’s fine, they’ll edit our voices out later.”

“By the way, when are we crashing the party?”

Aoba answered his teammate,

“Once we know what we’re up against. This could turn into a brawl between Dragon Zombie and Jyan Jyaka Jyan, so when that happens you guys might have a chance.”

Just as he said that, another gang member, who had been watching with night vision-equipped binoculars, passed down news of what was going on.

“Oi, one group’s heading for the entrance.”

“Which one... Oh, Jyan Jyaka Jyan, huh. And in front of them the scary guys from the Awakusu-kai...”

Aoba scoped out the situation with the camera’s zoom function.

It looked like a scuffle had broken out near the entrance of the villa.

“Is it starting? Now, the demon or the snake, which will move first...\*” “

(\*Referring to Dragon Zombie and Jyan Jyaka Jyan respectively; Jyan Jyaka Jyan has the kanji of evil-snake-evil.)

Aoba was observing the situation curiously when he noticed a fluttering light on the upper left of the screen.

“Mm?”

It was a tiny flicker at first, but by the time he noticed it had expanded, streaking from the second floor of a villa to the grounds outside.

—A Molotov?!

Just as Aoba noticed what it was exactly—there was a shattering of glass, and flames bloomed across the ground.

“Whoaa?! What?!”

“Who did that!”

“Was it you bastards!”

The Molotov had come flying at them out of nowhere.

It was more than enough to ignite the simmering tensions between the gangs.

With the first blow struck between them, violence exploded across the entire area.

"Ah, dammit, what a bunch of hot-blooded guys. Jyan Jyaka Jyan always get all pissed when they see us, and it's vice versa, too."

Li-pei, who had been observing from a distance, eyed the fighting resignedly.

"Well, nothing we can do now it's started."

His voice was disapproving, but his eyes were smiling with amusement.

A few of the younger members of Jyan Jyaka Jyan charged from behind him with metal pipes.

"Go to hell Li-peiiii!"

The men yelled, raising their pipes, but Li-pei spun with a flash of silver.

With sharp, metallic cracks, the metal pipes rolled to the ground in pieces.

The men stared stunned at the scimitars in his hands.

(T/N: The *Ryuuyoutou* sabres from SH.)

Eyes darting between the sorry state of their weapons and Li-pei's swords, the men yelled and fled.

"So those are their new recruits? Really feeling the manpower pinch on both sides."

Li-pei shook his head with a bitter smile, and ambled forward.

Not to stop his comrades; only so as to watch the unfolding of events from the heart of the battlefield.

Conversely, the Awakusu-kai men, who knew that the Molotov had been thrown from inside the villa, after a moment of fear, began to charge toward the villa's entrance with their own cries of anger.

This time, as if having expected this, another Molotov came flying out at them.

That was not all.

The crowd began to get pelted indiscriminately by random Molotovs from the grounds of the neighbouring houses.

Roiling up even more havoc were what seemed to be tear gas bombs—the grounds owned by Shijima Group descended into utter panic.

"Fuck! Oi, get me a gun!"

Idiot! Aozaki-san will kill you!"

"But at this rate we're getting nowhere!"

"What's Izumii doing! Pass him the weapons, get him to bust in with his people!"

"He's in no state! The bastard's hopeless with fire!"

Amidst their screams and angry yells, someone decided to retaliate by driving a car into the villa; the crash destroyed the serenity of the forest, and the flames from the Molotov glowed off the fumes of tear gas, illuminating the night.

"They're in a right state."

Aoba murmured as he turned the camera.

"Oi, what happened to that Yahiro kid?"

"He met up with the Headless Rider on his own. Since the Headless Rider makes this awful face... er, awful gesture whenever I show up."

"So you gave up on him?"

"No, I'm looking forward to what those two are going to do. Especially since getting it on camera's probably our aim here."

Aoba grinned as he continued moving the video camera.

As if answering to his expectations—

Q r r r r r r r r r r r r r r r r r r h h h h h h h h —————

The rewing of an engine, almost like a horse's neigh, reverberated through the flurry of chaos and destruction on the grounds.

The ones who reacted most to this unearthly engine roar were the occupants of the villa.

"This sound... There's no mistake... It's the motorcycle of Headless Rider-sama!"

"It is! Where... Where is it coming from?!"

Aya and Ai, who had been flinging Molotovs down from the second floor of one of the villas, began to weep, their eyes glazed.

Leaning her body out of the window, Aya craned desperately to find the source of the sound.

And amidst the firelight, clouded by smoke—she saw it, on the roof of the neighboring villa.

The idol of her twisted 'faith'—the Headless Rider, Cely Sturluson.

"Ahh... Ahh... She's come... She's finally here! Our saviour!"

Aya gazed up at Cely, on her motorcycle atop the roof; her face was streaming with tears.

However—

"Aya-nee-chan... but..."

Hesitantly, her younger sister Ai pointed a finger slowly.

"Who... is that?"

She was pointing at a coal-black shadow behind the Headless Rider.

It was made of pitch darkness itself.

If the Headless Rider could be described as clad in a rider suit the colour of darkness, this, on the other hand, was as if shadow itself, in wafting fumes like dry ice, had coalesced into a human shape.

—Just who was it?

No, was it even a person?

There were a few who thought this; the same, tiny few that had noticed the presence of Cely and the unknown.

Yet—in the next moment, every person on the scene was made to acknowledge the 'Shadow Man'.

" ————— "

From the roof he howled.

It was a scream that split the night and would silence crying babies.

The brawling men, even those who were fleeing mindlessly from the fire, found themselves frozen instinctively.

For that howl had overcome them on a visceral level.



With a crushing fear that stole their focus from incoming fire and their opponents.

“What... is that...”

One of the bosozoku whispered, but no one could answer him.

The Headless Rider was well-known to all in Ikebukuro; a familiar monster.

But the monster that stood there was a completely unknown quantity.

Tension ran high on the scene.

Amidst the crackling of fire and the coughing of the tear gas victims, one of the bosozoku cracked under the pressure, and flung a metal pipe at the man on the roof.

“What the hell are you!”

But the Shadow Man caught the pipe neatly—and with it in hand, began running down from the roof.

Just as they thought he would jump down to the ground level, he stopped at the balcony of the second floor, and stood off with the kidnappers inside.

On the second floor of the villa were about five well-built men. Seeing the Shadow Man reaching to break the Molotovs, they yelled in surprise and tried to stop him.

But those men were quickly suppressed and dealt with.

The Awakusu-kai members and the brawling bosozoku at the entrance to the grounds felt their hearts quail at the screams emitting from the second floor.

Their feelings had been dulled by Heaven Slave, but the sheer bizarreness of what was going on seemed to have evoked a fear even the drug could not repress.

“Now’s the time! Attack!”

Taking advantage of the opportunity, the Awakusu-kai lackeys charged forward, beating their opponents to the ground.

“Go to hell!”

The Awakusu-kai men, having long lost their restraint, were kicking at the ribs and heads of the enemies that had gone down.

Just as it was certain someone would die—the second floor window shattered magnificently, and the Shadow Man came flying out.

He flashed to the group with inhuman speed, swiftly invading their ranks.

“W, what the hell! Whose side are you on!”

Panicking at the sudden intervention, one of the Awakusu-kai men charged forward.

But the Shadow Man evaded by a hairsbreadth, and grabbed his opponent’s wrist, twisting him to the ground.

“Guah?!”

“Dammit! Shit!”

Letting out incoherent battle cries, the young men of the Awakusu-kai lunged forward.

He avoided their attacks easily, and continued dodging around the chaos that was the villa’s grounds.

Whether Jyan Jyaka Jyan or Dragon Zombie, the kidnappers or the Awakusu-kai: he challenged them all indiscriminately.

But there was some pattern to the fights he started; it seemed that he would seek out the hotspots of the fight closest to him and transfer all of their hostility to himself.

Almost as if he was quenching the fight by creating a common enemy in himself.



—Wait... is that Yahiro?

As he filmed, Aoba muttered this internally.

For he had realised that those sharp, economic movements, as the being went up against a crowd of enemies, was remarkably alike to how the boy had fought Heiwajima Shizuo in the video.

“Ahaha!! Did you hear him roar?”

Smiling, the other person who had recognised the Shadow Man for who he was—Ei Li-pei—asked his sisters the above.

“What a delighted scream that was... Yahiro-kun.”

Minutes later.

The Shadow Man, after running around the fire- and smoke-filled battleground, eventually scaled the outer wall of a house nimbly, and stepped into a room in a villa.

There, there was a young woman and a girl.

They were the sisters of Tatsugami Himeka.

“What are you... Just... what exactly are you?!”

The sight of the being instilled a primal fear in Aya.

It was not the Headless Rider.

It was a completely different monster they had never heard of.

“How are you related to the Headless Rider.... to Celty-sama...?”

To Aya and her cohorts, who had fallen under the illusion that they were becoming a part of urban legend, the Shadow Man’s existence was a splash of cold water.

The figure raced towards them with superhuman movements; to them it was as if he was saying mere humans like themselves were unfit for the Headless Rider.

“What are you!”

With that cry, Aya flung a Molotov.

But the Shadow Man caught the bottle from the air—and wringing out the fire with his black hands, he answered, calmly,

“Exactly as you see... I’m a monster.”

♂♀

10 minutes ago. In the basement.

‘Uwahhhhh, no way... So all this happened because of meeee!’

Celty rolled on the floor as she typed erratically.

‘Whatttttttt. What~? Whaatttt~?! What this?! A cult dedicated to worshipping me... What’s with that?! I wasn’t informed! No one told me!’

The embarrassing sight was hard to link with the legendary Headless Rider; Himeka and Kuon stared dumbfoundedly, while Yahiro, who had grasped earlier that Celty was remarkably human, was rubbing her shoulder, asking, ‘Are you okay?’

“Goodness. If they saw you like this maybe they’d snap back to their senses immediately.”

Celty leapt to her feet at Shiki’s words.

‘Exactly! If I come out in front of them and say, “Stop doing this,” wouldn’t everything be solved?!’

“Perhaps not. Assuming all of them have been addled by the effects of Heaven Slave, I wouldn’t be surprised if they

choose to kill the god for the religion, so to speak. It's also possible they'll say, 'There's no way Headless Rider-sama would say that,' and decide you're an imposter."

'No way! What should I do then!'

Celty asked in panic. Shiki informed her coolly,

"It's our job from here on. You've been proven innocent. Even if you indirectly contributed to this situation, you need not worry about us forcing the responsibility on you."

Realising his implication that she would have to do something to compensate in future, Celty gloomily decided to pull back.

"Wait... Nee-san... What about my sisters?"

"...It's unlikely they'll opt to eliminate a group with more than ten civilians... but considering how messy things will get, I can't promise they'll be unharmed."

"That can't be..."

Himeka's eyes bespoke her anxiety. It felt as if any more discouragement would have her rushing out to save her sisters herself.

'What about if I tie everyone up before it becomes a fight? If I do that the Awakusu-kai people won't act rashly, right?'

"...It's true that if you did that we could hand over everyone except the mastermind Shijima to the police or the hospital, and end things there."

Shiki agreed. Yet one person objected.

"Could all of you just stop this..."

'Kuon-kun? What's wrong?'

Kuon answered Celty's question with a self-deprecating smile.

"I mean... Just like how Himeka's sister and her friends worship you, Celty-san... I know a girl who worshipped this man called Orihara Izaya in the same way... To the point where it felt as if she would kill herself on the spot if Orihara Izaya didn't need her anymore."

—Why's Izaya's name popping up here?!

Celty was shocked, but Kuon continued,

"If you stop all of them directly, Celty-san, wouldn't it cause irreversible damage to one or two, or even more people?"

Himeka-chan's sister seems particularly susceptible, isn't that right?"

"...I can't say you're wrong."

Himeka said a little sadly. Celty sunk into thought—

But then Yahiro said to Himeka,

"Then let me do it."

"Eh?"

"I'll suppress all of them. Tatsugami-san's sister and her people, and depending on the situation the people from that something-kai, all of them."

'What are you saying, Yahiro-kun, that's...'

Celty tried to discourage him, but Yahiro, smiling faintly, replied.

"Isn't that what you said to me earlier, Celty-san? To become a monster."

'That's not rela...'

Before she could stop him, Yahiro was shrugging off his jacket.

"What are you saying... Why would you put yourself in that kind of danger..."

"Oi, are you serious?"

Himeka and Kuon each had their own protests, but after some thought Yahiro told them:

"The only thing I'm good at is violence."

"..."

"I'm not as strong as Kuon-kun or Tatsugami-san. All I've ever done is run from reality."

Those were Yahiro's true thoughts.

Now that he knew of Himeka and Kuon's pasts, he felt that he might not have been able to overcome such things as they had.

They had strong hearts. But his own was weak; all he had was a happenstance gift for violence.

"But... How can I say this? If there must be something to connect someone like me to the world, I think it can only be violence, in the end."

"..."

"Yeah, there's no way I'm not a little insane."

He smiled as if he had finally understood something, and Kuon and Himeka saw his most excited expression yet.

"So, at the very least... I want to live without regrets."

With that Yahiro folded his jacket neatly, and started trying to wrap it around his face.

Seeing this, Celty realised his intention.

'Ah, are you hiding your face?'

"I don't want to cause trouble for my family or make them worried... And if people see my face I'll be scared that they'll get back at me."

'For someone volunteering for something so outrageous you're awfully thoughtful about the details, aren't you.'

Celty typed. Yahiro only smiled awkwardly as he replied.

"...I'm a coward, that's all."

Seeing the smile on Yahiro's face, Celty had concluded that it would be useless to try to stop him.

She had seen many boys like this in the past; a person wearing that expression would not change their mind because of what someone else said.

She slumped as though heaving a sigh—and emitted a thick shadow-fabric from her palm.

'I can lend you a mask to hide your face, at the very least.'

As she passed over the odd shadow-made cloth, she heard a deep sigh from behind her.

"You're cooking up all kinds of plans on your own there."

'Ah... Shiki-san, this is, um... for the sake of the Awakusu-kai too, um, see, it'll be all sorts of trouble if they fight with a civilian boy, right?'

Celty explained nervously; but ignoring her, Shiki stood in front of Yahiro, and looked into his eyes as he said.

"Oi. Kid."

"...Yes?"

"Do you know what it means to go up against this 'something-kai'?"

"..."

Yahiro fell silent; Shiki continued.

"Have you considered what would happen if your family gets attacked in retaliation?"

“At that time...”

Yahiro hesitated for a beat, and answered frankly,

“I think I’ll have no choice but to get rid of them permanently...”

It was neither sarcastic nor in jest.

This was Yahiro’s answer, completely straightforward.

Having received this kind of a reply, delivered with such honest eyes, Shiki narrowed his eyes and eyed Yahiro.

And then, with a bitter smile, he spoke to Celty.

“So that’s how it is. He truly is a monster.”

‘...Shiki-san?’

“I can’t do anything about a mysterious monster running around.”

Shiki might as well have said he would play dumb to what the boy planned to do.

But—

“But. If a single person from that ‘something-kai’ dies or gets permanently disabled...”

Shiki uttered, voice icy and razor-sharp.

“Without fail we’ll shred that hide of yours from your body... boy.”

♂♀

Present time. On the roof of the villa.

Shiki’s words flitted across Yahiro’s mind.

In the end, Shiki’s flintlike gaze in that moment was the most terrifying thing Yahiro had faced that day—and at the same time, the last of his fears that day.

—How strange.

—Wrapped up in this shadow... I feel like a lot of things aren’t scary anymore.

When Celty had accepted him, monster or not, and wrapped her shadows around him, the ‘fear’ in Yahiro had cleanly disappeared.

This was important to him.

Because of his fear, he had a tendency to go too far regardless of his opponent.

But now his fear had lessened his heart was at ease enough that he could easily limit his strength.

Was it the influence of Celty’s shadow wrapped around him, or Celty’s words, or both?

He did not know why. But in the instant Yahiro had become a complete monster—he had felt himself released from his fear.

He corralled Himeka’s sisters and tied them up with a bedsheet from the room so they would not be injured, and ascended to the roof once more.

The emotion overflowing within him was a shade different from when he had fought Heiwajima Shizuo with his full strength.

Perhaps this was no more than a trick of his senses.

Whatever the cause, violence was violence.

He was simply using Himeka as an excuse to beat people up.

This he was well aware of—yet still Yahiro felt joy.

He did not care if he was good or evil or a monster.

He had been able to become a ‘monster’ by his own will, and just by that fact, he felt that he had taken a step out of

the world he had been locked out of until now.

He felt that, for the first time, his existence had been affirmed, and—

Once again, Yahiro's howl rippled through the sky.

"Whoa. This is amazing! Fantastic! I wasn't expecting a hero to show up!"

The bosozoku, suppressed by the monster that had suddenly appeared, were losing their confidence. Yet amidst them one man, Ei Li-pei, was in very high spirits.

"Maybe 'freak' is better? Eh, whatever. Awesome."

He sheathed his scimitars behind his back, and clapped his hands like a child.

"I want you on my team more and more, Mizuchi Yahiro-kun."

After saying that his face quickly turned serious, and he murmured.

"Though... Maybe I should call you 'nameless monster'. Something that shouldn't exist..."

Then a good idea seemed to hit him, and Li-pei asked his sisters beside him,

"Hey, what about calling that monster... 'Snake Hands'?"

"Now, things are getting interesting..."

Switching off the camera, Aoba smiled cheerfully.

"That monster... Well, Yahiro-kun, that is... He might be making enemies with all of the gangs, but he's an ally to all of them, too."

"What's that mean?"

"It's time for a new generation. Previously it was an organisation that moved the city. This time it's the opposite."

With a wicked smile mismatched with his childlike face, Kuronuma Aoba watched the monster from the roof, murmuring to himself.

"Now... How will you change Ikebukuro with your strength...?"

And so, on this night—

A new 'monster' shook the streets of Tokyo with its birth cry.

That cry spread across the internet from the video Aoba had recorded—

And before the day was up, took form as the latest urban legend in the rumours.

As if the city itself was broadcasting the monster's existence.

# エピソード



# Epilogue A

## The Entrepreneur

Ikebukuro news site, *IkeNEW! Version IKEBUKURO*

Latest Article, *'Birth of an Urban Legend': The Headless Rider's Lover Appears?!*

'The Headless Rider brings us a new urban legend'—Excerpt from Tokyo Warrior Digital Edition

"It was mid-April when the return of the famous Headless Rider was first witnessed.

Perhaps less known is that a new urban legend emerged at the same time.

A clip uploaded to a video sharing site shows what appears to be a late-night brawl between bosozoku gangs.

The sudden appearance of the Headless Rider halfway through would presumably have led to a climax to the chaos—but the fight was forcibly put out, and not by the Headless Rider.

The silent motorcycle that transforms into a headless horse. And its decapitated rider, brandishing a pure black scythe. He, or she, has brought us—another anomalous figure.

Wrapped in squirming shadows from head to toe; even its face unseen.

Crushing waves of oncoming thugs with unbelievable skill.

A supernatural being that displayed staggering power against tens of opponents.

What is the identity of this new urban legend?

Mr Tsukumoya Shinichi, a writer based in Ikebukuro, commented on his blog, 'The Headless Rider, tired of being the source of legends, has brought us a successor. Perhaps the half-year disappearance was a journey to find this successor.'"

[\(Click here to read the full article\)](#)

*IkeNEW!* Administrator's Comment

"The Headless Rider's lover debuts-nari.

We too promoted the idea of the Headless Rider being a woman previously; now it turns out she has quite the exciting social life too-nari.

Black rider black warrior. Makes a nice couple-nari. The lovey-dovey type that tag along with each other everywhere, how sweet-nari.

It seems that there's a rising trend in Dragon Zombie to call that creature 'Hebite'... 'Snake Hands'-nari.

So for convenience we'll be using the nickname 'SH' or 'Snake Hands'.

It'd be nice if it could stick and make its way into a dictionary someday.

Plus, apparently the green-head that disappeared was rescued safely with the help of these two-nari.

The Headless Rider got a date, and everyone got their happy ending-nari.  
And they all lived happily ever after. Nari?"

Administrator *Lila Tailtooth Zaiya*



Shinra's apartment.

"Happy ending my foot~!"

Shinra, who had been browsing a news site, suddenly wailed and began to roll around on the sofa.

"How is this happy, there's nothing happy here Celty. Celtyyyyyyy."

'What's wrong now? Are maggots taking over your brain?'

"Look at this website! It's spreading horrible lies about you having another lover, ignoring my existence completely!"

'What if they aren't lies?'

Celty asked mischievously. Shinra's face paled and he began to howl.

"No way... If that's how it is, I won't hand you over! I'll fight this Yahiro child to the death!"

Shinra, who had already heard of what happened from Celty, uttered the name of the monster—'Yahiro'—as he brandished his fists.

'He's powerful enough to take on Shizuo.'

"...We'll compete with our knowledge of medical terminology!"

'How old are you!'

Celty scolded. But Shinra continued rolling about.

"Uwahhh, this whole thing makes me so angry! They said they were worshipping Celty but they didn't even make a proper statue! I'd long have done a 3D scan of Celty while she was sleeping and mass-manufactured life-size models!"

'Wait a minute, did I just hear something I really shouldn't ignore?!'

Afterwards, Celty managed to calm Shinra somehow, and began to contemplate Yahiro.

'But I do wonder who told that child there's a monster in Ikebukuro.'

"Hm?"

Shinra cocked his head, and so Celty elaborated on the boy's past:

'Ah, you see, apparently Yahiro-kun came to Tokyo because a tourist back home told him there's an even better monster in Ikebukuro when he saw him fighting.'

"...Mm?"

Shinra thought for a moment, and asked Celty,

"Where did this Yahiro come from again?"

'Akita, he said.'

Then Shinra clapped his hands together, and said promptly,

**"Oh, then that was me."**



‘...What?’

“Remember? The day after the Omagari Firework Festival we went to the Haburagi springs, right?”

‘Oh... That secret spring.’

“I remember I was taking a walk around there when I spotted this boy covered with blood and fighting people, so I said something like that.”

Oh, so that was what happened... The two laughed about it together along those lines, and after, Cely typed in a large font to Shinra.

‘Oh—... Then you practically invited him here!’

“R, Really?”

‘What a coincidence... The article was saying the Headless Rider was searching the country for a successor—isn’t that almost exactly what happened?!’

“...Ahhhhhhhh! No way~!”

Shinra’s face was the epitome of regret as he wailed.

“Ahhh, did I call my rival forth to Ikebukuro myself?! Did I deliver suffering unto myself? They say to love your enemies, but I gave that kindness to a stranger and made him level up into a love rival, what folly... I’ll be a monster too, Cely! Split some of that shadow you’re wearing to me or we can occupy it togethermarobugyurubu”

‘Don’t smoke your way through to get a hug!’

As Cely shoved Shinra off, she felt that she had truly returned to her everyday life.

The rumours about her being the kidnapper had stopped now the missing people were back, and it seemed the number of people accusing her had mostly died down.

She was feeling grateful for her everyday life when just then, Shinra suddenly asked,

“By the way... What happened to Tatsugami-san’s family?”

‘Right... They were hospitalised. Apparently that Shijima guy forced the drugs on them, and neither Shiki nor Kuon pressed charges, so it’s hard say what they did constitutes an actual crime.’

‘I guess they just have to settle it within their family from here on out.’



Raira General Hospital. Private ward.

Due to the effects of the drugs—Cely’s ‘worshippers’ only returned to their normal state of mind five days after the incident.

“I heard Ai can be discharged soon.”

Himeka informed Aya. Aya, from where she lay on the bed, turned to her and mumbled,

“...In the end you were the only one who got it right, huh?”

“That’s not it. You just used the wrong way. It’s good that you were thinking of the greater good.”

Himeka said calmly. Aya smiled with a tinge of loneliness, and answered,

“...You really are strong.”

"You think too highly of me."

"So that's why the Headless Rider chose you..."

"That's not related. I can introduce the two of you next time."

Aya smiled bitterly at her younger sister, who had so simply offered to introduce the Headless Rider.

"I have no face to see her. What I did... I wouldn't be surprised if the Headless Rider killed me for that."

"You're... not that person anymore."

Himeka sighed. Aya suddenly felt curious, and asked,

"Hey... Why did Headless Rider-san... disappear for those six months?"

While Aya knew it would be unfair to blame the urban legend for the despair she and her comrades went through, she could not help her being curious.

After a moment of thought, Himeka, without hiding anything, said what she had been told.

"She said she went to tour hot springs."

"..."

"..."

Time stopped between them.

After a while of silence. Aya spoke, her voice shaking.

"Tour... hot springs...?"

"Yeah... from Akita to Kyushu... a full country tour..."

Himeka nodded. Aya was dazed for a moment, but then —

In the end, as if a dam had broken, she burst out laughing.

"Aha... Ahaha... A hot spring tour, what on earth..."

After laughing for nearly a minute, her smile began to turn teary.

"Half a year to tour hot springs... Did I really... give my life over to someone so carefree?"

Aya laughed and wept at how ridiculous she had been; Himeka merely watched on the whole time.

"It's just as you said, Himeka. This really might... be just how the world is."

Aya apologised sadly, but Himeka shook her head, expressionless.

"I'm not accepting this world either."

"What...?"

"But I can't find it in myself to hate this life. Because I have... Dad and Mom, Nee-san and Ai. This precious family.

That's why... instead of running away, I want to make it so everyone can be happy."

Taking Aya's hand, Himeka spoke the words she never could before.

"The world might be unfair, but I don't think that can't be changed."

"Do you still—think of me as your family...?"

Aya asked uneasily. Himeka tilted her head. "Shouldn't it be obvious?"

At this answer, Aya turned towards the window, and murmured.

She was crying again, but her tears were different from earlier on.

"You're a strong girl after all, Himeka."

When Himeka exited the hospital, Yahiro was waiting outside.

"How was it?"

"She's mostly well now, I think."

At Himeka's words, Yahiro felt relieved, almost as if it were his own family in hospital.

"That's great. Now you can be with your family again, just like before."

"...mm, it might not be just like before, exactly..."

"How?"

Yahiro queried without hesitation. Himeka did not appear to mind; she simply described her family situation to him.

Yahiro listened silently about her mother, and, blurted, abruptly,

"I think your mother's keeping it in that shadow on the wall."

"Huh?"

"The part of her she doesn't want... The weak part of her that might have caused her children pain."

Yahiro, choosing his words carefully, began to talk about the behaviour of Himeka's mother.

"Like how the barber of King Midas shouted into the hole. She buried her true self that she didn't want to show, the person she might become someday, all in the shadow on the wall."

"Why do you say that?"

Although she felt he might simply be trying to comfort her, Himeka asked for a basis to his words.

But the answer Yahiro uttered was unexpected.

"Because that's how I was, too."

"...You, too?"

"Because I was cowardly, I couldn't stop being terrified of the people who tried to hurt me. In my mind, I honestly felt... Before they kill me, I have to kill them first. Then I won't have to be scared anymore."

"..."

"That's why, in my mind, I always hit my enemies until they couldn't move. Every night, every night, I would escape into that kind of fantasy. So that I could suppress it in real life, just that little bit."

"But wouldn't that do the reverse?"

Himeka asked frankly. Yahiro shrugged as he answered.

"Maybe. But in reality I've never actually killed anyone... No, but I've gone over the top too many times, so maybe that doesn't actually mean much..."

Yahiro decided there was no point overthinking it, and, sighing, said to Himeka with a bitter smile.

"I don't know what's right or wrong. I'll try to remember that from now on."

And, clenching his scarred fists, he promised Himeka:

"That's why, I'll be the hands for all of you. If you get in trouble, Tatsugami-san, or Kuon and his sister, any of you, I'll use these fists to protect you."

"...I'm impressed you're not embarrassed saying things like that."

"Should I be? Am I weird after all?"

"Yeah, you're weird."

Himeka answered frankly, and her expression morphed to accommodate the emotion within her.

It was unlike sadness or anger; there was no need to suppress this.

"But I think that's wonderful."

Yahiro saw the soft smile spreading on Himeka's face, and smiled, shyly, in return.



As he watched them leave from afar, Kotonami Kuon spoke into his phone.

“Tsk, tsk, my masquerade was wasted, all thanks to this talkative big sister of mine.”

‘It was useless to try with that hair and face. I told you.’

Nozomi giggled from the other side of the line, and started to talk about Yahiro.

‘But that boy, Yahiro, he really is interesting, as far as nice guys go. Even knowing your true nature he was worried about you still.’

“And how did you react, Nee-chan?”

Kuon said. Nozomi replied, brightly,

‘Yahiro-kun wasn’t bothered by it. I told him, you know... that you don’t think of him as more than a pawn.’

“There you go again, running off your mouth.”

‘What do you think he said then?’

“?”

Kuon hesitated, stumped.

And then, Nozomi said.

‘He said it doesn’t matter.’

“It... doesn’t matter?”

‘He said that, whatever reason you have, it’s the first time another kid’s spoken to him normally. That he was happy there were people who didn’t fear him and spoke to him normally even after seeing him fight. That’s what he said.’

“...”

‘He said, that’s why, to him, Tatsugami-san and Kuon-kun are worth protecting with his life. Unbelievable, right? Can you believe that was all to it?’

After some thought, Kuon asked, doubtfully,

“Did he really say that?”

‘I dunno? It’s up to you to judge, hm? You know I specialise in lies and gossip, right?’

—Ah, she’s being honest, then.

Kuon sensed this intuitively, and sighed long and deep; and with a cold voice he said, quietly,

“No matter how he interprets it, I’m only using him.”

‘Oh my, poor Yahiro-kun.’

“For a guy with that much power, he’s too pure. Seriously...”

Kuon rolled his shoulders, and scoffed.

“This is why I hate humans.”



Kotonami residence.

Checking that the line was cut, Nozomi smiled slyly as she murmured.

"You'll never become Izaya-san."

Cheerily, bemusedly, her true intent concealed behind that smile:

"Because, unlike Izaya-san... you're just that little bit too soft-hearted!"



Shinra's apartment.

'But Yahiro-kun really is a funny guy.'

"I can be funny too! Wait, I'll... I'll say something funny right now, so...!"

'Don't force yourself.'

Celty chided Shinra, whose face was turning red, and thought back on Yahiro.

In the end, she had passed off the whole ensemble, mask and clothes, to the boy.

She had gone to the effort of making it after all, and decided that it was better off in his hands than dispelled immediately.

*—'I don't know how long it'll last since I've never tried, but well, if it evaporates or anything just contact me. I've made helmets before without any issue, so it should be gentle on the hair and skin... I think.'*

And there, Yahiro had asked a vital question, his face completely serious:

*—"This can be washed, right?"*

Celty snickered internally at the memory; at the sight, Shinra realised.

"Ahh! Ah, just now Celty thought of Yahiro-kun and laughed...?"

'You're perceptive about the strangest things.'

"Wait... Something funny... Have to think of something funny... D, do you like stand-up comedy Celty!"

Shinra seemed close to tears; Celty typed, exasperatedly,

'You're too desperate. ...Eh, I have some time off anyway. Let's hear this comedy of yours.'

"Really?! ...wait, you're taking leave again?"

'Shiki-san said to lie low for a while. And there are people who still suspect me, apparently. Anyway, well, I'll look for other part-time jobs, so you don't have to worry.'

"It's okay, I'll feed you for the rest of our life! Why not just be a housewife while you're at it, you can just laze around in front of me every day!"

Shinra suggested, eyes sparkling. Celty slumped tiredly, and showed him her smartphone.

'No thanks. I'd rather not have such a mundane life.'

Neither had noticed.

That, in the corner of the site *IkeNEW*, there was a mysterious banner nested between advertisements.

A small banner that would only show up if one scrolled to the complete bottom of the page; containing only the letters 'SH'.

Those who were sharp enough to notice were directed to the following site upon clicking it:

'Conflict resolution for Ikebukuro.

Finding people, revenge on bullies, bodyguarding—anything you can think of!  
Ikebukuro Communal Aid Group—Snake Hands'

This odd advert would later embroil Celty in a life far from mundane –  
But as of right now, she had no way to know this.

# Epilogue B

## The Next Prologue

“Have you tracked Shijima down?”

Five days after the incident, Shijima asked his subordinate this again.

But the answer remained unsatisfying as the one a few days before.

“No, there’s no trace of him...”

It was clear that Shijima was the one to found the Headless Rider cult.

That had been confirmed again by the testimonials of the cultists who had regained their rationality in the hospital.

“It’s unlikely.. that he only packed up and fled when he saw us coming, either.”

Not all of the people on the villa grounds had been Headless Rider-fanatics escaping from reality.

Some of Shijima’s old acquaintances had been employed as bodyguards via means of money and drugs. In fact, the guard that Shiki had beaten up was one of them.

But even they confessed to know nothing of Shijima’s whereabouts.

It was true that Shijima had founded the group, but apparently the cultists had upscaled on their own. He had not discouraged this, but all he had done was provide funds and Heaven Slave.

The Awakusu-kai had threatened his grandfather, chief of Shijima Group, and his father, an executive; but they said their son had remained missing for more than a year now.

A man that should have been reduced to dust. Just what was he planning?

With a sense of omen, Shiki looked out of the office window, and murmured.

“Honestly... I thought things would go a little smoother after that informant disappeared.”

“But the moment we solve one problem another one pops up. What an unrewarding job...”



Somewhere in the city. A rented office.

A small office in a certain building.

The floor above appeared to be rented out to a group that operated phone call scams; the chatter of their conversations drifted down from the ceiling.

In this empty room there was a chair, and on the chair was a man.

The upper half of his face was wrapped in bandages, and the gaps between revealed a pair of eyes that gazed into the empty space.

A woman’s delicate hand curled around the man’s neck.

On closer inspection, her fingers were littered with scars. Stroking the man’s neck seductively, she spoke.

“Orihara Izaya... didn’t interfere with this case, hm.”

“No, he didn’t.”

"I wonder what's up with him. Is he really dead, you think?"

"I don't care about that. I just want my own revenge. Orihara Izaya comes second."

At that, the woman tilted her head in surprise.

"Oh? ...I thought your plan was to take revenge on Orihara Izaya. Apparently not."

"What about you, Earthworm?"

The man – Shijima – asked coldly. The woman he called Earthworm hummed, and replied with some consideration.

"I don't know. I guess I'd be glad to kill him if I could, since he was a jerk."

With the way she snickered, it was hard to tell how much of it was truly joking.

She leant her cheek against Shijima's head, and asked, bemusedly,

"Since you don't care about Orihara Izaya, who are you going to take revenge on? The Headless Rider? Heiwajima Shizuo? Awakusu-kai's Akabayashi?"

Shijima's answer was toneless.

"The city."

There was a quiet madness in his eyes; if any who knew him before were to see him now, they would probably ask: Was this man really Shijima?

The man stared into space with a silent, hollow gaze – and visualising the scenery beyond that emptiness, simply uttered, gravely:

"I chose to take revenge on the city of Ikebukuro."

"Grand ambitions... So, what do you have in mind precisely?"

"Nothing, really."

Still expressionless, Shijima, without a glance at Earthworm's beautiful figure, continued.

"There are plenty of seeds for tragedy strewn through the city if you look. It's merely that most never get to sprout."

"I'm just... adding a tiny bit of water and fertilizer."

Just as he said, despite that the giant waves of the 'Dollars' and 'Orihara Izaya' had died off, at this point in time there were countless 'seeds' left behind in their wake.

Would these seeds sprout forth fortune or tragedy?

At this time, no one knew.

Including even the madness of this twisted avenger –

The city begins to weave a new tale.

So long as people continue to exist within it.



CAsp

三頭池八尋  
琴南久音  
辰神姫香

黒沼青葉

折原九瑠璃  
折原舞流

粟楠茜

琴南望美

辰神彩  
辰神愛

嬰麗貝

四木

平和島静雄

セルティ・ストゥルルソン  
岸谷新羅



TO BE CONTINUED DURARARA!!  
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